

# When things are no longer possessions: does dispossession still take place in a context of collaborative consumption?

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## When things are no longer possessions: does dispossession still take place in a context of collaborative consumption?

**Abstract** : Based on the social life of things theory and a qualitative study conducted among 28 participants, we identify four disposition routes that occur when a consumer wants to give or sell his possessions on second-hand marketplaces (identity-based, mechanical, insecure, and opportunistic), that depends on psychological, material and environmental criteria. We highlight the fact that disposition is now becoming a rationalized and routine process rather than a dispossession one, in which individuals become distributors and opportunists.

**Keywords** : Second-hand economy, disposition, possession, gift-giving

## Introduction

900 million. That is the number of unused items that would be sleeping in our French homes (Ipsos, 2019). Despite the fact the many redistribution practices are exploding in the second-hand market, consumers have difficulties in disposing of their things. To dispose of their things, consumers use processes based on a set of complex decisions (Marion 2020; Roster 2014), in which possessions become rubbish - objects that are no longer used and cared (Thompson 1979). These processes are as a set of physical (Hirschman, Ruvio and Belk 2012) and psychological (Young and Wallendorf 1989) removal steps requiring detachment rituals (McCracken 1986). Researchers use the term of dispossession, as a process in which the individual must make the possession no longer part the extended-self (Roster 2014). This explains why dispossession processes have been mainly studied within a ritualized framework of meaningful possessions (Cherrier and Murray 2007; Guillard 2017), or in a context of gift-giving and sharing. Nevertheless, in a context of collaborative consumption, where use increasingly predominates over ownership (Belk 2014), we can ask whether disposition still means dispossession and detachment, or if it is increasingly embedded in consumers' daily lives.

We anchor our research in the second-hand economy and observe all kind of peer-to-peer redistribution practices (online and physical gift-giving, donation, online and physical resales). In these practices, consumers participate in value creation, turning the unused possession into a new economic, social and/or cultural one (Belk 2014; Roux and Guillard 2016; Scaraboto and Figueiredo 2017). In this research, through the voluntary dispossession model (Roster, 2001; Vanier et al., 1987), and a longitudinal qualitative study with 28 participants, we show how these second-hand places change the way of dispossession. We identify all the disposition routes at work when a consumer wants to give or sell his items on second-hand marketplaces: (i) identity-based, (ii) mechanical, (iii) insecure and (iv) opportunistic.

## Theory: dispossession process through the social life of things

To dispose of their things, consumer can throw them away, give them away or sell them (to relatives, neighbors, associations, through P2P digital platforms). We focus here on the second-hand practices – giving and selling. According to a study conducted by FEVAD and KMPG in 2022 on the second-hand market, many consumers re-use their possessions. For example, 70% of French-speaking shoppers say they use second-hand product resale platforms. Besides, many C2C gift-giving platforms are exploding, such as Geev, which has already "saved" 12 million items since its creation in 2017. If giving and selling are not new – flea markets have existed since the 16<sup>th</sup> century– several phenomena influence their

redevelopment: an ecological awareness of hyper consumption's negative effects, various economic crises, trades opening allowed by Internet and access-based consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). They are motivated by ecological, economic, social, or even hedonic goals (De Ferran et al., 2020; Ertz et al., 2017) and become more and more competitive, digital and industrial (Juge, Pomiès and Collin-Lachaud 2022). If the research shows that they are influenced by different factors (identity or material), it mainly looks selling and giving as stationary practice rather than an evolving and dynamic one. Based on the work of (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005), we consider them as dynamic processes starting long before the moment of physical separation, and involving decisions about which practice to adopt and how to "bear" the separation from the possession.

When consumers choose to dispose a possession, they commit themselves to disinvestment rituals to help them breaking away from their things and purifying them (Hirschman et al., 2012; McCracken, 1986). Vanier et al. (1987) use the term of *dispossession*, defined as a psychological and emotional process in which a consumer gives up his material and symbolic links with an object (Roster 2001; Young and Wallendorf 1989). It involves identity issues that cause individuals to enact rituals of dispossession such as spatial distancing or divestment cleansing (Ekerdt 2017). With spatial distancing, possessions go through transitional spaces such as the attic or basement, taking different statuses - affective, liminal, sacred, or profane (Beldjerd and Tabois 2014; Hirschman et al. 2012). Besides, dispossession is a means to reject an undesired past-self (Lastovicka et Fernandez 2005), to construct a new self (Cherrier and Murray 2007) and to develop a mutual and shared self with other people (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005) or with the planet (Dobscha and Ozanne 2001). Many other elements influence the disposition process such as perceived residual value (Kreziak, Prim-Allaz and Robinot 2020), possessions' attachment (Guillard and Pinson 2012) or familial identity (Phillips and Sego 2011). For example, the more attached individuals are to their possessions, the more they will have to go through cooling "transition spaces" for helping them detach from their things (Hirschman et al. 2012). Similarly, an object with high financial perceived residual value will be more likely to be sold (Kreziak et al. 2020) and to go through ritual cleansing (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005). Our goal is to go beyond these results by focusing on how individuals dispose of their things, how they manipulate them and modify their value: how do they move them from a state of waste to a state of reuse?

To answer this question, we rely on the social life of things theory (Appadurai 1986). This material conception of things gives primacy to the materiality of objects and their articulation with the social (Casemajor, 2014; Miller, 1987). It considers the object as being at the heart of social interactions (Blandin, 2002). Possessions "transform and assume different regimes of value as they move through space and time" (Casemajor 2014, 14), and we need to follow the things themselves to trace "their forms, their uses and their trajectories" (Appadurai, 1986, p. 5) since it is when they are in movement that the social context emerges. This is what we did in our qualitative methodology.

## Methodology

From September 2019 to March 2021, we conducted a qualitative study with 28 participants recruited through the family, friendship, and professional circle. These participants, aged 25 to 68, all donate and/or sell and have reused at least one of their items in the three months preceding our meetings. With these participants, we conducted 45 interviews, 18 participant observations, and 17 narrative stories of moments of donation or resale. The one or two interviews by participants described stories of dispossession and reuse, starting with items that had recently been disposed of or were in the process of being disposed of. Two types of participant observations were added: 13 observations of the respondents' homes, to obtain data on spatial placements, and 5 observations of sorting with the intention to give or sell the objects. We also collected narrative stories. We also personally invested ourselves in dispossession and kept a diary recounting our giving and selling processes, as well as our feelings or impressions emanating from the field. Finally, we made sure to collect photographs, whether during interviews or observations, to illustrate the discourses.

We obtained 385 pages of data and 98 pictures. The data analysis was guided by the itinerary method, set up by Dominique Desjeux (2006), which consists in "*reconstructing the process of acquisition [here, of separation] of a good or service, whether market or non-market, in order to understand the social dynamics of the decision*" (Béji-Becheur & Dias Campos, 2008, p. 52). For each disposition process analyzed, we looked at the criteria which were discriminating and important. Then, we aggregated all these results to obtain 4 routes that go beyond dispossession.

## Findings

We identify four disposition paths: (i) identity-based, (ii) mechanical, (iii) insecure and (iv) opportunistic. These paths differ according to the reason for non-disposition if there were any (Guillard & Pinson, 2012), the triggering factor of the separation, the person responsible for the decision, the category of things involved, the perceived residual value (Kreziak et al. 2020), the emotions, the temporality, the reuse practice used and the constraints that can occurred (Appendix 1).

### *Identity-based disposition*

First, our results show that the dispossession path (here, the *identity disposition*), as the ritualized process of giving up symbolic links with affective possessions, is increasingly rare. Today, thanks to all the P2P platforms that are developing, individuals seem less attached to their possessions, and do not part with those that are dear to them. It requires many years of

reflection and spatial distancing (Price et al., 2000) before doing it, and concerns mostly gifts, symbolic clothes (for example, baby's first bodysuit or wedding dress) and jewelry that are no longer linked to present family identities. Things were kept for emotional reason and the decision is made for rational reasons such as lack of space, moving on or familial events. It raises strong emotions such as nostalgia or sadness. Stephany, a psychologist in her forties, illustrates this point:

*"I recently gave my daughter's baby bodysuits and bed, to a friend. It took me a while to do it, because, well, it means that she's grown up, that she won't be a baby anymore. It was weird and not easy, but at some point, let's face it, I couldn't keep them."*

The transmission to relatives is the main redistribution practice mobilized in this case, as it allows consumers to share the private meaning with relatives. However, more and more consumers use online resale for these affective items, to avoid the burden of the gift, and to financially compensate for the separation.

### ***Mechanical disposition***

Secondly, we observe a new form of process, made of actions anchored in the daily life, that we call the *mechanical disposition*. Today, C2C online resale and giving replaces transmission and gift-giving, and with that, mercantile and rational practices go beyond the symbolic ones. Beyond removing the private meanings of their possessions with ritual cleansing, sellers wash, iron, and fold for market reasons (make people want to buy/collect) or social ones (out of respect for the recipient). Here, consumers set up well-defined, carefully orchestrated, and controlled steps (Warde 2016) to transform waste into commodities. At regular and repetitive times (every Saturday, once a month, every school vacation or change of season or even when the kids take the bath), consumers sort, make quick decisions, clean, take pictures, post ads, send or drop off items, and start again. In this case, things rarely pass through "cooling off" places, or it is only while waiting to have the necessary time to take care of it. They are categorized as "disposable" with labels or specific places, separated from the other stored things (Figure 1).

This controlled and robotized process is mostly for non-utilitarian and non-affective kids and adults' clothes or toys - things in large quantities that are often renewed. Due to this anticipated process, the disposition provides satisfaction (of a tidy home and of not being overwhelmed by material possessions), pride and pleasure, of serving others thanks to the transmitted item. Disposing and reusing become habits: as more and more people are thinking about how they are going to dispose of their things before to buy them, the item *never really becomes a possession* -and then, we could not talk about dispossession in this case. A very

telling example is that of Marie, who explains that she no longer annotates her books, but uses post-its, to avoid making them too personal, and to give them away more easily later.

**Figure 1.** Pictures of items for sale or donations



### ***Insecure disposition***

However, consumers not always anticipate the disposition or take the time to put in place some specific rituals. They usually wait until the last moment, not for affective reason but due to lack of time or willingness to take care of it, as Diane tells us:

*“I don't have time at all, so they [kids' unused clothes] are piling up - to my husband's great joy! - and they're all still in boxes. When I have a little more time, I think I will do it.”*

They know that they eventually must dispose of some things, but they do not know how, when and to whom. We call this process the *insecure disposition*. Here, people are similar to the “keepers” (Belk 1985; Haws et al. 2012) that have difficulties to dispose of their possessions (mostly furniture, small appliances, electronic equipment and childcare) for potential-use reason or lack of time. Unexpected events such as a change of family structure or a move, pushes them to do it. In this process, consumers have paradoxical feelings, between anxiety about managing all the accumulated possessions and relief of having succeeded in “letting go” of many things. They mostly give to charity or resale online to have either a moral counterpart (helping those in need) or financial one, to help them getting through this moment perceived as tedious and constraining. This process represents the most important challenging one for the companies of the reuse sector, because here, individuals keep their possessions until the very last moment, with the desire to choose the best possible path, for utilitarian reason and not affective one. With a little help, they would reuse.

### ***Opportunistic disposition***

Finally, the *opportunistic disposition* is becoming more and more common. In this process, people have in mind what possessions they want to dispose of but wait for relatives, charities,

or other structures to need it and ask for it (directly or indirectly). They are mostly eco-friendly people, who do not want to discard their items and want to make sure that it will be reused properly. For example, Pauline waits for the announcement of the passage of a charity in her neighborhood, Cindy likes to check on second-hand marketplaces if people need some things that she could have: she considered this as more efficient, faster, and more useful, because it targets people or structures that really need it without many time and cost efforts.

## Conclusion

In our collaborative context, things are more disposed but less dispossessed. People seem to be less attached to their things, except for valuable possession with strong identify-link or for gift (that they keep), and it changes their disposition behaviors. What is interesting to note is that the processes are less about disposition than about value creation. We are no longer so much in a framework where individuals seek to purify the private value of their possessions, as they consume and use objects in which they are no longer so invested. Items are more “we” than “me”, to quote Lastovicka and Fernandez (2005) and then, it changes the way we re-use them. Besides, choices related to separation and reuse are not always anticipated and thought out. They are sometimes impulsive and inconsistent. If we understand in more detail all the reuse and separation routes that exist, it may be easier to provide suitable offers to encourage these practices.

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1. Disposition paths

	Reason for storage	Triggering factor of the sorting	Decision-maker	Separation	Perceived residual value of the object	Types of things	Emotions	Temporality	Reuse practices
<i>Identity disposition</i>	Emotional: the possession is a symbol of a period of life or of a person. Fear of regret, symbol of deprivation.	Occasional events (family events, moving, time...)	The possession's owner(s)	Anticipated Reflective	Affective (but not enough to be kept) Affective and financial Non-utilitarian	Souvenirs Jewelry Childcare Symbolic clothes	Sadness Nostalgia	Long with a lot of cooling off steps	Gift-giving Transmission Sometimes online resales (but with a physical meeting)
<i>Mechanical disposition</i>	No storage without being used	Routine moments (weekends, school vacations, ironing...)	The possession's owner(s)	Anticipated Organized	Non-utilitarian Non-affective Financial or not	Clothes Toys Books	Satisfaction Pleasure Pride	Quick (just the time to sell or go to the association)	C2C online resales Donation
<i>Insecure disposition</i>	Utility, the possession can still be used or repaired	Unexpected or suffered events (moving, change of family structure, congestion)	The possession's owner(s) but with relatives' help, or relatives	Non-anticipated	Affective (but not enough to be kept) Utility and/or financial (new purchase never used)	Books Furniture Electronics Childcare	Anxiety Stress Relief Release	Long with a lot of cooling off steps	C2C online resales Gift-giving Donation (in last choice)
<i>Opportunistic disposition</i>	Undecided on how to dispose of it. Lack of time	Request from an individual or institution	The possession's owner	Non-anticipated	Non-utilitarian Non-affective Financial or not	Kitchen utensils Tools Technology Clothes Toys Home decoration Culture	Relief Pleasure to be of service	Quick or long (it all depends on when the request is made)	Gift-giving Donation