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Giving, Selling or Throwing Away Unused Objects: A Complex Decision

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

People have several choices for disposing of their unwanted object: throwing away, giving to charities, selling online or in flea markets. Why are some objects thrown away while others are eligible to reselling? This research exposes explanations of why people choose one of these options, and how they build their disposal practices. Disposition is viewed as all actions taken by an owner towards an unused item (Jacoby, Berning, and Dietvorst 1977) but I focus on practices involving the loss of a physical property - the object is no longer possessed by its owner.

Priori research in disposition identifies motivations of redistributing items instead of throwing them away (Bergadaà, 2006, De Ferran et al., 2020, Guillard and Del Bucchia, 2012; Lemaitre and De Barnier, 2015). Consumers want to reduce waste and preserve the environment – and for some of them, oppose the throwaway society (Ertz et al. 2017, Roux and Guiot 2011). They also reuse their items for saving money, meeting financial needs, or having fun and playing shopkeeper (Juge, Collin-Lachaud, and Roux 2019). Finally, redistributing objects favor social links. Other literature has shed light on several factors influencing disposal practices, such as product-related factors, individual factors, situational factors, and practices-related factors (Albinsson and Perera, 2009, Roster 2001, Paden and Stell 2005, Trudel et al., 2016) but without totally explaining how. This present research focuses on how people decide between disposal practices (online selling, online giving, flea markets, charities' donations, and garbage) and what are their meanings.

To do so, I conducted a 6-months ethnography with diversifying profile, data and collecting tools. The study occurred in Paris, France, from July to December 2019 and followed three steps: three introspective stories, thirteen in depth interviews and four participant-observations. The 2-pages introspective stories were about reselling a phone online, sorting clothing and donating them to a charity. This helped us prepare interviews. Then, a first sample of 13 consumers was interviewed. Nine interviews occurred at participants' home and four over the phone. They lasted 65 minutes on average and were about current objects they want to dispose of: what will they do about it, how and why. We started again with every object they want to cede. Interviews were completed with four participant-observations of sorting with intention to redistribute items: one sorting of clothing by a mom, one sorting of male clothing, one preparation for a move and one deceased person's possessions disposal. Those observations helped to understand choices between disposal practices and decisions regarding specific object. Each observation happened at participants' home and included the author's participation. Using a protocol analysis (Payne, 1976), participants called out any decisions, ideas and thoughts about what they would do with an object. Observations were recorded in notes, instant photos, and audio recording. We took 45 pictures and had seven hours and half of audio recording. I hold a logbook to note field reports and any feelings or theoretical ideas. All the data from interviews, introspective stories and observations were analyzed through a manual thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Several themes emerged for each disposal practices identified; we compared them to identify differences and commonalities.

The findings show that informants dispose of an object when they are not attached to it, do not use it anymore, consider that it takes up too much space or keep it stored for too long. Some consumers need to distance their objects spatially and temporally by stocking them in "cold" places for some time like basements, attics, or closets

before to dispose them. This helps them forget about their link with their objects and be ready for disposition. When they agree to cede the object, this latter does not exist anymore for its owner. All participants agree to say that the more an object is affective, the more difficult it is to cede it. That is why they more dispose of everyday objects like clothing, toys or furniture than special ones like gifts, jewelry or family's possessions. We notice a growing interest for online reselling and donation: considered as easy, useful and planet friendly. Participants do not use only one disposal practice but sell, give to charities, or attend a flea market, several times a year. The choice of the most appropriate practice is driven by three dimensions, which are interrelated: (1) a product-related dimension, (2) skills and habits, (3) meanings according to the practice. These dimensions are linked together and the interactions between them influence the decision-making process. For comprehension matter, I will introduce the three dimensions separately.

First, disposal practices are different according to the physical characteristics of the object: the heavier or the more cumbersome or in high volume the object is, the more consumers will try to cede them easily and will give it, thrown away it or attend a flea market. For example, clothing, books, or toys are more often given to charity and relatives than sold. But when the object has emotional value or high market value, consumers will sell it online. Nowadays, consumers use C2C platforms for every type of objects which has a minimum market value, they will try to sell it. They will give objects they failed to sell online or on flea markets. We notice that donation increasingly becomes a fallback solution than the first one. Some intimate-related objects, such as underwear, mattress, or household linen, are more thrown away because of the object's perceived contamination. Besides, participants reuse objects with utilitarian or market value when they throw away worn down or old-fashioned objects.

I also notice that skills and habits matter in the disposition choice. Some people prefer to throw away or give to relatives and charities because they do not feel skilled enough to sell or to give online. It takes efforts to write classified ads and time to be available for answering and meeting. Flea markets require to store all the objects, to get up early, to fill the boxes or to think of all prices. Consumers perceive it as binding. To sell, people need to assess the potential price of the product and to have business skills for negotiating. In line with Denegri-Knott et al. (2009) selling requests a significant investment for maximizing the economic value. As several consumers think they do not have it, they rather give. Giving is based on habits; most of participants are used to give to charities because they saw their parents do it and perpetuate family pattern. Giving to relatives is a rooted behavior because their family does it as well.

Finally, the decision is related to the meanings of the disposal practice. Redistribution practices are considered as means to valuing and passing objects, to reducing environmental impacts and teaching kids the good manners. In this case, consumers prefer giving and selling than throwing away. However, they favor different practice according to what they want. They choose flea markets when they seek a friendly and sharing moment. They give to help citizens and promote social meetings while quickly disposing of bulky objects. Sometimes, not knowing the potential recipient of their object can be hard. Therefore, they favor online giving or relatives 'donation to have a look on the future of the object. For those who prefer to earn money or play shopkeeper, they focus on online selling.

This research makes several theoretical and managerial contributions. If past literature studied factors that influence redistribution instead of garbage (Albinsson and Perera, 2009 ; Paden and Stell, 2005), this research shows that the disposal decision is not only between throwing away or redistributing but also between the type of redistribution practices. I confirm products-related factor such as utilitarian, emotional, and/or financial value (Roster, 2001) but I also show that skills (efforts that need to be made), habits, and meanings need to be considered. This research reveals the complexity of the decision because consumers must deal with different factors to make their choice. Besides, I note an increasing progression of redistribution practice, which is a positive trend for environment. This research gives charities or C2C platforms some foods for thought to better develop their activities. For instance, people might be afraid of what their objects will become by giving them to charities. These later should favor communicate about how the objects will be used in the future. It could also help consumers to detach from their objects. Then, C2C platforms should facilitate the website's use and reassure people about how easy it is to sell or give online – by developing apps for example or guidelines about how to price their products.

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