



Journal of Promotional Communications

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information: <http://promotionalcommunications.org/index.php/pc/index>

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To cite this article: Gilbert, D. 2017. A Biographical Study of Mobile Phones as Cherished Possessions. *Journal of Promotional Communications*, 5 (3), 323 – 341.

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Danica Gilbert

A Biographical Study of Mobile Phones as Cherished Possessions.

Current consumer research focuses on possessions with one biography, or possessions with many biographies due to multiple owners. Findings uncover the presence of two biographies co-existing within one possession, a contractual mobile phone. Furthermore, this object is neither fully owned, nor rented temporarily, contrasting to existing literature. The research is phenomenological, with a combined methodology of a biographical letter written by participants, followed by a face-to-face interview. The sample included nine participants from the south of England, and explored their mobile phone experiences. From this data, this article explores the mobile phone's biography and the affect had on its biographical stage and network. This research found that a contractual mobile phone embodies the biography of the device and the biography of the digital content. Attachment to the device was ephemeral, however the digital content displayed ongoing singularization. From this, the relationships consumers have with mobile phones as valued possessions are identified.

Keywords: Ownership; Singularization; Possession; Consumer research; Consumption.

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INTRODUCTION

The overall aim of this paper is to better understand a consumption object's biography in situations where no transfer of ownership occurs. The target object of possession chosen for this study is a leased mobile phone. This modality of ownership is predominant in the UK, where 91.5 million mobile phones are currently obtained by way of contract (Ofcom 2017). With regard to the biography of a mobile phone, typically once the contract has come to an end, consumers will discontinue use of that mobile phone in favour of a newer and better model. This routine, whereby mobile phones are used for approximately two years before being discarded, is familiar to mobile phone manufacturers who encourage consumers to browse and purchase a new mobile phone nearing the end of their two-year contract. Even if the mobile phone is still fit for purpose, with a newer version on the market, consumers are likely to feel dissatisfied with their current mobile phone and have a "desire to purchase new products" (Ackerman 1999, p.21). With the use and eventual disposal of an object primarily based on a timed contractual period, the ownership and possession of mobile phones raise questions that are not currently explored in consumer research.

Existing research has shed light on ideas surrounding consumer possessions, with particular focus on the ways in which objects transition from commodities to valued possession (Kopytoff 1986), through the process of singularization and possession rituals (Kopytoff 1986; McCracken 1981; Cooper-Marcus 1992). Singularization occurs through use of an object, transforming it into a possession (Kopytoff 1986). Furthermore, theorists have studied how mundane possessions take on sacred status (Kopytoff 1986; Chalmers and Arthur 2008; Tian and Belk 2005; Denegri-Knott et al. 2012), and how possessions are recommodified (returned to the marketplace). This may be due to factors including situational circumstances, contextual constraints (Epp and Price 2010), or as a result of changes in the value that consumers impose on their possessions (Kopytoff 1986). The latter provides reasoning behind the way that objects travel through biographical stages, and how meaning and value can align with the biographical stage an object resides in. Epp and Price (2010) expand on Kopytoff's (1986) work, with the idea that possessions can travel back and forth between biographical stages, dabbling in stages such as reincorporation and re-engagement, whereby consumers will attempt to reincorporate displaced possessions back into their lives. Furthermore, objects are shown to affect the "practices, objects and spaces" (Epp and Price 2010, p.820) that form a consumer's network, demonstrated through the synergy of objects' biographies within a consumer's life. The way an object transitions through different biographical stages can affect the entire network.

Current research has thus far primarily focused on possessions that are either fully owned, e.g. a dining room table (Epp and Price 2010), or attained through an access-based mode of consumption, e.g. a rented car (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012), and the effect that these have on the way that consumers transfer and extract meaning to and from objects (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Kopytoff 1986; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Denegri-Knott et al. 2012). For example, research has suggested that consumers find it harder to put meaning into objects that are consumed on access-based terms than objects that are fully owned, due to the often-temporary use of the object (Watkins et al. 2012). This gap in research is addressed by mapping out a mobile phone's cultural biography. More specifically, in this study we will account for the different ways in which consumers transition their leased mobile phones through various biography stages, drawing attention to the market and non-market forces of agency in singularized mobile phones. In doing so, this paper will be an expansion on consumer research that was currently focused on objects that were either fully owned or temporarily leased, and will contribute to a better understanding of the relationship consumers have with their mobile phones as cherished possessions. To begin with, the research is framed within the umbrella concepts regarding consumer possessions and the biographical stages that an item travels through throughout its lifetime. Furthermore, ideas surrounding singularization and recommodification are explored in depth to provide further theoretical context. Studies surrounding objects consumed on access-based terms are also highlighted, providing a theoretical background to the paper. Findings and analyses of nine in-depth interviews are shared, with the aim of uncovering a greater understanding of mobile phones as valued possessions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumer Possessions and Biographical Stages

To begin with, the literature on the biographical approach to possessions is discussed. The work of Igor Kopytoff's (1986) has been used in previous studies into possession processes and attachment and has provided a productive framework to assess changes in an object's valuation over time, such as in Epp and Price's (2010) study of a family's dining room table. Kopytoff (1986) theorises that possessions have a biography, punctuated by different stages and defined by different sources of meaning and value. For example, commodities are defined mainly by their exchange value, whereas possessions are defined by their personal or cultural significance. Focusing primarily on the commoditization, decommoditization (singularization) and recommodification stages in an item's biography, Kopytoff demonstrates how possessions are able to move seamlessly through these stages, forming a journey that goes on to shape the biography of the object (1986). As objects transition through stages in their biography, the objects acquire cultural meanings that may adapt, as the movement of the object continues (Kopytoff 1986; McCracken 1986). Rather than maintaining a constant value throughout its lifetime, an object's meaning is fluid (McCracken 1986), and correlates to the biographical stage the object currently resides in (Epp and Price 2010; Karanika and Hogg 2013).

A possession begins life in a commodity stage. Kopytoff (1986, p.68) defines a commodity as "a thing that has use value and that can be exchanged in a discrete transaction for a counterpart, the very fact of exchange indicating that the counterpart has, in the immediate context, an equivalent value". While in a commodity stage, objects are valued in terms of their exchangeability and market price value, and are not of particular value to the consumer. As objects move from the marketplace into consumers' homes, they transition to a different biographical stage of a possession. This is demonstrated through possession rituals (McCracken 1986; Cooper-Marcus 1992), singularization (Kopytoff 1986), subjectification (Miller 1987) or cultivation (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). Singularization is diametrically opposed to commoditization, and is a process that takes an object out of its "usual commodity sphere" (Kopytoff 1986, p.74). Singularization occurs through the use and maintenance of an object, and transforms a mundane object into a valued possession (Kopytoff 1986). Possessions may also take on "multiple registers of value" (Epp and Price 2010, p.10), whereby they gain value from numerous aspects, such as market value and kinship value (Epp and Price 2010).

Furthermore, through performing possession rituals like cleaning, discussing and photographing possessions, consumers are able to "extract the meaningful properties that have been invested in the consumer good" (McCracken 1986, p.79). These processes are described as cultivation of psychic energy (Denegri-Knott et al. 2012). "Our dependence on objects is not only physical but also, more important, psychological" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, p.486). In differentiating a mere commodity from a singularized possession, consumers "invest tremendous amounts of psychic resources" (Denegri-Knott et al. 2012, p.78) which instils meaning to a possession. Furthermore, Belk et al. (1989) describes how performing rituals with sacralised possessions ensures that "what is to remain in the sacred realm does not slip away" (p.28).

Items with heightened meaning are those that consumers have spent significant time and effort on (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Kopytoff 1986). Through acts of self-investment by the consumer, value and meaning is transferred to the possession. Schiele and Hughes suggest that these rituals, through the process of singularization, take an object from a stage of "anonymous good" to a "personalized possession belonging to the consumer" (2013, p.4). Denegri-Knott et al. (2012) use Miller's work (1987) to expand on Kopytoff's (1986) theories regarding singularization, and argue that through the process of subjectification, which involves objects being incorporated "into a total stylistic array" (p.78), objects become possessions.

Through singularization, objects are pulled out of the "exchange sphere" (Kopytoff 1986, p.82) and may gain sacred status, giving commodities and cherished possessions "categorical differences" (Denegri-Knott et al. 2012, p.78). Singularized possessions are distinguishable from commodities in their relationships to cultural categories (Kopytoff 1986), identity, and family and individual history (Richins 1994). These physical and psychological investments by consumers into their possessions remove the connections that the possession once had to the market (Molesworth et al. 2016). Commodities have clear-cut values in terms of market price; singularizing an item grants it additional value. The idea that ordinary possessions may become sacred is widely accepted in consumer research (Kopytoff 1986; Chalmers and Arthur 2008; Belk et al. 1989; Denegri-Knott et al. 2012), though the process of singularization does not necessarily guarantee sacredness (Kopytoff 1986). Although an object may not achieve sacred status through singularization, it still gains significant value compared to a commodity. Possessions that are not classed as sacred, still hold value to the consumer.

Expanding on Kopytoff's research (1986), Epp and Price (2010) put forward the idea that there are four additional biographical stages between singularization and recommodification, (Kopytoff 1986). These are; Threatened displacement, Displacement, Reincorporation attempts and Re-engagement. Epp and Price (2010) offer a unique idea that possessions can transition back and forth throughout biographical stages. Using the example of a family's dining room table, the researchers observed the family's repeated attempts at re-incorporating the table into their lives after it had been displaced, demonstrating how the biographical movement of a possession is not always a linear process, as suggested by Kopytoff's work (1986).

"Practices, objects and spaces" that consumers use, and are part of, make up their network (Epp and Price 2010, p.820). Within their network, objects' biographies fit seamlessly together in a consumer's life. Due to other objects' biographies, spatial biographies, and contextual constraints (Epp and Price 2010; Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005), an object can be forced into a displacement stage. Referring back to Epp and Price's longitudinal study focused on a family's large dining room table (2010), two key elements are seen to provoke the displacement of the table, thus transforming the family's network. First, a contextual constraint, whereby the family moved to a smaller home and could no longer fit in the dining room table; second, another object's biography (a smaller table) clashing with that of the dining room table, as the smaller table was more appropriate to the family's network. As the large

dining room table was displaced, the family's network was disrupted, demonstrating how "the movement of a singularized object in and out of a network of activity inevitably transforms the network" (Epp and Price 2010, p.833).

"Consumer research assumes that as long as an object remains important it will be protected from recommodification" (Epp and Price 2010, p.821). Exploring Kopytoff's (1986) work, in which items gain meaning through singularization, it can be assumed that if an item leaves the singularization stage and transitions to a stage of recommodification or displacement, it can no longer hold meaning to a consumer. However, research has challenged previous ideas about values of possessions at different biographical stages. Epp and Price (2010) theorise that displaced objects may continue to hold value to consumers while still providing a sense of identity, contradictory to prior research (Belk et al. 1989; Karanika and Hogg 2013). In Epp and Price's study (2010), although the dining room table was considered "inactive" (p.824) and was displaced, the family still claimed it was of great value to them. Furthermore, although singularized items can travel through periods of activity and "inactive displacement" (p.832), they may still provide value to the consumer (Epp and Price 2010).

Fixed Ownership vs. Access-Based Consumption

With the rise in popularity of rented items compared to those that are owned (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012), ideas centred around ownership and possession have been questioned. Current consumer research has thus far focused on objects that have a clear-cut ownership (Kopytoff 1986; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Denegri-Knott et al. 2012), or on the other hand, are rented for short periods of time on access-based terms (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). A mobile phone, which is often leased contractually by a provider, fits into neither of these categories, and poses issues surrounding ownership.

Expanding on Gaus' (2012) work on Bundle Theory, Watkins et al. (2012) provide insight into possessions that are co-owned. Bundle Theory states that objects can have several owners, all of which value the object differently. This raises questions regarding true ownership of an item. If an object is owned by several people, it can be said that many people own the item, or no one does (Watkins et al. 2012). With the example of a rented house, it can be jointly owned, mortgaged, and entrusted. In this example, Bundle Theory demonstrates how multiple people have the rights to the house, which leads to the question of who is the true owner? (Watkins et al. 2012). As ownership helps to mold the consumer-object relationship (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012), not having full ownership of an item can lead to problems with making that object meaningful to the consumer (Watkins et al. 2012). With regard to a contracted mobile phone, consumers "must first agree to terms set out in End-User License Agreements (EULAs) and Terms of Use/Service contracts which typically include a range of restrictions on their ownership, enforced by the code itself" (Watkins et al. 2012, p.9). A mobile phone can be seen to be 'owned' by both the consumer and the mobile phone contract provider. This leads to a skewed view of ownership of the mobile phone, resulting in further questions regarding possession, especially considering consumer relationships differ with owned items compared to access-based items (Moeller and Wittkoswki 2010).

Current research focuses on the values that consumers place on their owned possessions (Kopytoff 1986), the way possessing an object affects its value (Epp and Price 2010) and the transferral of meaning from owned possessions to consumers (McCracken 1986). Furthermore, McCracken's work (1986) proposes the idea that owned objects may be better transporters of cultural meaning. With owned objects' rigidness and sameness, they are able to provide consumers with consistent meaning, in comparison to access-based items, which in their short-term use may not contribute such consistent value. Watkins et al. (2012) highlight issues with current research focusing solely on either fully owned possessions or access-based objects, stating that "access-ownership dichotomy assumes ownership as something that exists either in full or not at all" (p.3). This can result in the assumption that there are only two types of ownership; ownership and access, which can sway research to view each as separate entities, when in fact they are linked (Watkins et al. 2012).

Consumers often view objects as owned possessions, even if they are not owned legally (McCracken 1986). With regard to items that consumers have full ownership of, the consumer can do as they wish, including using, selling, and allowing or disallowing others to use the item (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) note that the key differences between owned possessions and access-based items are "the nature of the object-self relationship, and the rules that govern and regulate this relationship" (p.2). Watkins et al. (2012) expand on this further, stating that ownership is "a legally and socially sanctioned arrangement between people and things" (p.3). Whereas possession is closer linked to the relationship between "things, people, devices, and knowledge" (Watkins et al. 2012, p.7) that align when an object transitions into a possession. The idea that ownership and possession are different, yet intrinsically linked (Watkins et al. 2012), is important in gauging an understanding of the values that consumers place on items. Consumers form significant and valued relationships with their owned possessions (Kopytoff 1986; Epp and Price 2010), but rarely seek to find meaning in temporarily rented items (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). Furthermore, when an item is leased to a consumer on a short-term basis, it can be problematic for consumers to form meaningful relationships with these objects (Watkins et al. 2012). A paid monthly contract enables mobile phone use, however due to the precarious ownership of the mobile phone, consumers may not have rights which allow them full consumption (Watkins et al. 2012), which may include things such as tampering with the mobile phone's hardware. A partly-owned possession may then not be the most suitable object for holding value and meaning. Furthermore, current research regarding access-based consumption focuses on items that are only rented for short periods of time, such as rental cars (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012), which provides reasoning as to why consumers may struggle or not want to place meaning on these items. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) challenge this notion, stating that access-based items can still provide consumers with a sense of self, but without the "obligations and responsibilities associated with ownership" (p.15).

Furthermore, values transferred to objects have a significant effect on the object's biographical stage (Epp and Price 2010; Watkins et al. 2012). However, with regard to access-based objects, Watkins et al. (2012) conclude that due to legal restrictions associated with semi-ownership, consumers may be restricted in transitioning objects to other biographical stages. This highlights another issue with consumer

meaning in objects that are neither owned nor lent on access-based terms; if consumers cannot impact the biographical transitioning of objects, it exposes questions regarding consumer meaning within their access-based items.

This conceptual framework begins with the need recognition (NR) and information search (IS) sections of the Consumer Decision-Making Process (CDMP) (Blackwell et al. 1995) to examine the channels which consumers look to and the types of information that they are searching for. The framework then flows into the FOV these particular channels, PRM of the source and attractiveness of the source to the consumer, all of which are factors of PSI, said to have an impact on PI (Larraufie and Sommer 2015; Lee and Watkins 2016), as well as factors of credibility, said to have similar effects. Combined, PSI and credibility are linked as influences to the consumer's PI, something which is not present in existing literature.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this methodology was to uncover and understand the detailed accounts of participants' experiences with their mobile phones to better grasp the consumer to mobile phone relationship. The methodology followed a qualitative approach; the subjective nature of this research is preferable for describing "life experiences and situations to give them meaning" (Burns and Grove 2003, p.19). Furthermore, Holloway and Wheeler (2002, p.30) refer to qualitative research as "a form of social enquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experience and the world in which they live". Similar to Epp and Price's (2010) study which took place inside a family's home, this research was also situated within participants' homes. "In-home research typically reduces informant reactivity and provides opportunities for display of artefacts, demonstration of process, and auto-driving" (Heisley and Levy 1991 cited by Epp and Price 2010, p.823).

Participants were gathered through convenience and snowball sampling due to participants fitting the suitable requirement of obtaining a contracted mobile phone, rather than owning a mobile phone that had been bought outright. Participants were a mixture of university students and working professionals, with professions including a teaching assistant, accountant and personal assistant. Interviewing participants who had a variety of experience with mobile phones gave richer and more extensive data to analyse, and allowed for interviews to sway to specific experiences depending on each participant. Participants were encouraged to talk freely, and no time limitations were put on answers. This gave way for thorough discussions of great depth and led to talks of participants' experiences being exhausted.

The methodology consisted of a two-part process; first, participants wrote biographies of previous and current mobile phones that held value to them, written from the mobile phones' perspectives. Second, in-depth interviews were carried out with each participant, which followed a semi-structured format (Bariball and While 1994) while being partly based on each participant's written mobile phone biographies. The methodology was carried out over the course of two weeks in April 2017 in Surrey, Bournemouth and Southampton due to participants' homes being in these locations. The sample was made up of six females and three males, between

the ages of 19-55 years, and who all had mobile phones that had been obtained by way of contract, detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' Profiles

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Location	Profession	Number of Mobile Phones Owned
Linda	F	55	Surrey	Teaching Assistant	8
Annabel	F	21	Bournemouth	University Student	5
Carol	F	54	Surrey	Teaching Assistant	4
Beth	F	33	Surrey	Personal Assistant	15
Steven	M	23	Bournemouth	University Student	4
Thomas	M	21	Bournemouth	Accountant	6
Emily	F	19	Southampton	University Student	5
Jonathon	M	23	Bournemouth	University Student	14
Diana	F	47	Surrey	Teaching Assistant	8

Aside from the demographic variables, there was other heterogeneity amongst the participants. An example of this, was a number of the participants used their mobile phones solely for contacting friends and family, while some of the participants used their mobile phones primarily for the internet and apps. This demonstrated different ways under which participants singularized their mobile phones (Kopytoff 1986). However, all of the participants commented on their frequent use of the mobile phone camera and the high importance this feature had to them, providing reasoning behind the value they associated with the photos taken and stored on their mobile phones.

The intention of the research was focused towards participants' lived experiences with their mobile phones (Thompson et al. 1989; Creswell 2007; McCracken 1988) and the meanings and values that participants associated with their phones at different stages in their biographies, rather than to produce research that could be generalised to the whole population. Taking a phenomenological approach to the interviewing, the small sample size of the interviews was sufficient in order to produce detailed accounts of the participants' personal experiences (Denegri-Knott

and Molesworth 2009); this is consistent with similar studies such as those carried out by Denegri-Knott et al. (2012). We were therefore able to combine immersive observation with a face-to-face interview, allowing each participant's experiences to be situated in detailed context, which contributed to a comprehensive analysis and better understanding of the data.

Prior to the interview, participants were asked to write complete biographies, in a similar style to a letter, of all mobile phones that provide or had previously provided them with value and meaning. The technique of letter writing has been shown to help people to express greater clarity (Nau 2008) in comparison to solely speaking about a topic, and allowed participants more control over the depth, intensity and volume of their contribution (Rasmussen and Tømm 1992). While the interviews alone acquired a significant amount of data, the purpose of the written biographies was to assist participants in thinking about their mobile phone experiences more extensively, to ultimately provide more in-depth interview answers. Furthermore, writing as a technique, can help participants to get perspective regarding the past (Nau 2008). Ensuring biographies were completed prior to the interview meant participants were situated in a suitable frame of mind to recall past experiences of their mobile phones. In terms of the length and time taken for the biographies, guidance was not provided by the researchers, so as not to implement researcher bias (Pannucci and Wilkins 2010). This allowed participants to write freely and delve into their mobile phone experiences in detail.

Interviews began with a grand tour question (McCracken 1989): "Can you tell me a bit about yourself?" to gain context about participants, which could be used to provide justification and reasoning behind answers to more focused questions. Following this, the interview was split into two sections; the first section asked questions relating to previous mobile phones, and the second section asked questions specific to their current mobile phone. This ensured that extensive data was collected about each participant's experiences with all of their mobile phones. Questions regarding experiences with previous and current mobile phones were often followed with: "How did that make you feel?". This allowed us to probe further into participants' lived experiences and feelings, helping to give context to, and immerse ourselves into, the participants' lives (Bitsch 2005). The interviews included questions regarding fond or unhappy memories with mobile phones, and reasons for obtaining and changing mobile phones. This led participants to delve deeper into memories and experiences of their mobile phones, and the values associated with the different stages in the mobile phones' biographies. The interviews were performed face-to-face as this offered a more precise indication of the feelings attached to each participant's answers, providing a more focused direction for the interview and subsequent questions. Implementing a combined methodology meant that the concept of triangulation was applied. This concept involves using multiple methods in order to gain a greater amount of data (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007). Furthermore, the method implemented the idea of thick description, as it would be simple to replicate, due to the straightforward processes that were carried out.

Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes each, totalling almost seven hours. Interviews were recorded via a mobile phone, then transcribed. Each interview transcript was read over to highlight and recognise areas where participants talked

particularly about meanings and values they placed on their mobile phones. Further hermeneutic analysis followed (Thompson et al. 1989) involving the participant responses being cross-referenced in order to uncover common themes that appeared throughout. Analysis of the data was a process of transcribing, interpreting and refining the emerging themes until "the interpretations sufficiently stood the weight of the data" (Hogg and Maclaran 2008, p.137). Participants' written biographies, which averaged 400 words per participant, were combined with the corresponding interview data and used as reference when themes were identified. As is highlighted in the findings, participants showed to hold great value in both the mobile phones and the digital content stored on their mobile phones. The value placed on both was intrinsically linked, though reasoning came from different experiences and for different reasons. Through analysis of the findings, three common themes emerged which will be discussed in the following section of the paper.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In this section, we discuss materialising themes from our interviews that deal with the experiences of owning a contractual mobile phone, particularly the forces that transition mobile phones through biographical stages. To begin with, we establish the presence of two biographies within a mobile phone: the biography of the mobile phone and the biography of the digital content, that provide two unique contributions to the available literature. The changing relationship that participants have with each, goes on to affect the biographical stage that the mobile phone resides it. Expanding on the work of Epp and Price (2010), we note the market as an additional force of agency which is not currently accounted for in existing research. This force assists in propelling mobile phones through different stages of their biography.

Two Biographies

Research to date has focused on possessions as material objects (Kopytoff 1986; Epp and Price 2010), or on digital possessions as digital content (Denegri-Knott et al. 2012; Molesworth and Denegri-Knott 2007). As a result, existing literature has often given the assumption that objects contain only one biography (either of the object or of the digital content); this biography shapes and mediates the relationship that consumers have with their possession and influences the biographical stage of the possession. Although the concept of multiple biographies has been explored in the context of borrowed possessions, whereby an object is "simultaneously active in more than one network" (Jenkins et al. 2014, p.131), the idea that just one consumer can experience multiple biographies within one possession has not been researched in great depth.

Over time, participants were seen to shift the highest value placed on their mobile phones from the mobile phone to the digital content. Upon initially obtaining a mobile phone, participants were focused on the monetary value and commodity status of the mobile phone (Kopytoff 1986). Mobile phones with a high market price correlated to greater value being imposed on them. However, as time progressed, value shifted to the digital content. This was particularly noted through discussion

with Annabel. Annabel is a 21-year-old student from High Wycombe, studying at Bournemouth University. She is deeply attached to her mobile phone ("I don't think I could live without it") and displayed a need to be in constant communication through her mobile phone, demonstrated through her continual checking of her mobile phone throughout the interview. Here, Annabel discusses what it would mean to her if her mobile phone was lost or destroyed:

"I'd be disappointed in myself and like 'oh my goodness, how did that happen?' and my phone is not insured so I don't know what I'd do. It would more be the fact that I'd have to pay money to get a new one, especially when this one is so new as well, I'd have to pay out more money for it... I think it would be much worse if I lost it in a year's time though as I'd have more on it. I don't have loads of photos on there now, the only thing I'd be worried about losing would be my notes because there is a lot on there, but I could replicate most of that from memory, whereas with photos I can't. As much as I do back it up, I don't back it up every day or every week, so if I did lose it I'd probably lose a lot of stuff. So that would be awful, like emotionally, to lose all those photographs, especially when you've got so many memories on there, and then to have the added cost of having to buy a new one."

Existing literature has accounted for the ways in which an object's single biography can affect its network position, for example when two objects' biographies collide forcing one object into displacement (Epp and Price 2010). However, the findings have shown that two different biographies co-exist within a mobile phone. This raises questions unanswered by current research regarding the impact of multiple biographies within a possession, that may affect both its network and biographical position. Furthermore, the work of Denegri-Knott et al. (2012) on the cultivation of digital goods can be used to approach the concept that meaning can increase exponentially within digital content over time. Due to the "lack of visibility and corporeality" (Denegri-Knott et al. 2012, p.81) of digital content, it is more precious to owners as it is "perceived as being fragile" (p.81). This leads to copying and storing of digital content in an effort to preserve it. Through the act of preserving, which can include "adapting, changing, storing and re-materializing" (Denegri-Knott et al. 2012, p.81) the digital content, meaning is cultivated. While this can be applied to both the mobile phone and the digital content, it provides reasoning behind why the digital content continues to hold value to owners, while value held by the mobile phone is ephemeral.

Expanding on the work of Epp and Price (2010) and Lastovicka and Fernandez (2005) which concludes that circumstantial events, spatial biographies and contextual constraints can drive singularized objects into recommodification; we consider an additional force of agency, the market. This was elicited when speaking to Thomas, a 21-year-old accountant from Portsmouth. Similar to the majority of participants, Thomas usually chooses mobile phones that are on a two-year contract, after which time they are discarded in a drawer. He describes how the market influences his decision in obtaining a new mobile phone and forces his old mobile phone into displacement:

"As time has gone on, better phones are the same price as the one I was paying for before, so why not upgrade? It was just to have the up-to-date thing really...I always try and keep them until the contract

ends. It's only when I realised I was paying the same price for a phone that's two years old when I could get a newer one for the same price."

We can distinguish that 'the market' encompasses both the market price of the mobile phone and the mobile phone contract. First, it is in part the market that pushed Thomas' old mobile phone into a stage of displacement. The equal price of the new mobile phone, paired with its better features, provided Thomas a straightforward decision in purchasing the new mobile phone and discarding the old one. With no need for two mobile phones, the biography of the newer object, collided with the biography of the old mobile phone, "foreclosing the potential trajectory" of the first mobile phone and propelling it into displacement (Epp and Price 2010, p.829). Second, the "introduction of new objects" (Epp and Price 2010, p.832) and "inheritance of objects with competing value" (p.832) are recognised as forces of agency that threaten singularized objects with displacement (Epp and Price 2010). The combination of these, plus the market as an additional force of agency, pushed Thomas' mobile phone into displacement. While Epp and Price's (2010) work on forces of agency can be used a basis to provide contextual meaning, the researchers focused their work and findings within the home, not accounting for forces at play outside of the home. Furthermore, it was mentioned throughout the majority of interviews that a primary reason for changing and upgrading mobile phones was due to the contract ending. This further reinforces the idea that possession biographies are accelerated through market mediation, an idea that has not yet been extensively explored in existing research.

The Biography of the Digital Content

The next contribution of the paper is to explain the ongoing singularization of the digital content stored within the mobile phone, which helps explain the accelerated biography of the digital content. Participants talked in great detail of the high value they placed on their digital content, something that was depicted in Diana's mobile phone biography letter, written from her mobile phone's perspective. Diana is a 47-year-old teaching assistant from Surrey. The digital content stored on her mobile phone, particularly her photos, is very important to her; she ensures that photos are transferred over from previous to new mobile phones to keep their accessibility. Here, she writes about her relief upon finding out her new mobile phone was capable of easily transferring digital content from her previous mobile phone:

"She was very relieved when the shop assistant told her that all her contacts could be easily transferred over to my lists and even her pictures could be put in my gallery with plenty of space left over for more! I could tell Diana liked to take a lot of pictures by the amount of time it took to transfer all of her pictures into my gallery – lots of photos of her family!"

Similarly, conversation with Linda demonstrated similar findings. Linda is a 55-year-old teaching assistant from Essex. Linda was recently widowed and commented on the similarities between her digital content and a physical "photo album" containing photos of her late husband. Linda has high regard for her digital content, despite not ensuring it is copied or stored on additional devices. While the lack of materiality means digital goods are "perceived as fragile and ephemeral" (Denegri-Knott et al. 2012, p.81), they are also more likely to be "preserved, via copying and storing" (p.81). Despite recognising that her digital content needed to

be backed up elsewhere, the absence of this preservation process made Linda's digital content even more precious to her:

"Obviously the old ones don't have pictures on them, but most of the new ones all have photos on. I need to find a way to get those pictures off those phones and store them somewhere. I can't do that but my son could probably do that. It's just the photos really. You're never going to use the phones again but yeah, the photos are important. The photos have the memories on them, not the phones themselves, it's because I know they're not backed up... I'd say the old phones have more special memories on. Pictures of my husband and things like that, pictures of us together."

The work of Belk et al. (1989) on the sacralisation of possessions offers reasoning behind how and why certain possessions take on greater value. It would be misrepresentative to equate digital content to a sacred possession, due to sacred items providing consumers "self-transcending [and] extraordinary experiences" (p.13). However, the theories on the sacralisation of possessions can be used as a basis for understanding the importance placed on digital content. Belk et al. (1989) describe how sacralisation can occur through rituals, such as singularization (Kopytoff 1986). For example, the theorists state that through the process of singularization, objects may take on a sacred status. It is important to note that although singularization "does not guarantee sacralisation" (Belk et al. 1989, p.14), the process does let consumers "bring order to their own world of goods and make sacralisation a possibility" (p.14). This allows for possessions to become decommoditized and individuated (Belk et al. 1989). Participants demonstrated singularization of digital content through discussion of time spent sorting and arranging their digital content. For example, through looking at and deleting old photos, participants attempted to bring greater value to their digital content. The digital content displayed ongoing singularization, continuing to be used and managed long after the mobile phone had been divested. Jonathon, a 23-year-old student studying at Bournemouth University, notes the ease of transferral of digital content in modern mobile phones, displaying the ongoing singularization of the digital content:

"When I was younger the phones weren't as advanced so if you lost stuff, you'd have to re-type it all in manually. Now that phones are more advanced I can just put it all on my iCloud and transfer it over to the next phone that I get. Especially when it's the same phone, you can just download everything from your iCloud. It automatically backs it up for you, so then all you have to do is download your profile when you get a new phone".

While current literature highlights the metaphorical nature of meaning and its fluidity throughout consumer possessions (McCracken 1986; Epp and Price 2010), our findings suggest that meaningful digital content is literally moved through multiple possessions. This is through its transferral to additional digital devices such as laptops and other mobile phones. The singularization of the mobile phone often ended once the mobile phone contract had come to an end, leaving the mobile phones often "stashed in a drawer" and "forgotten about". However, the transferral of the digital content to the new mobile phone was highly prioritised. Participants discussed their devastation at hypothetically losing their digital content. To prevent

this situation, many participants saved their digital content elsewhere, in case anything were to happen to their mobile phone, preventing the digital content from being accessed. Digital content within mobile phones is "easily transferable to other digital virtual goods and is therefore not bound to the original mobile phone" (Denegri-Knott et al. 2012, p.88). Once the meaning, (the digital content), is transferred to a new mobile phone or other digital device, the old mobile phone is left as an empty carcass or "blank phone", void of meaning.

The Biography of the Mobile Phone

The final contribution of the paper considers the biography of the mobile phone, whereby the mobile phone acts as a vessel of cultivation (Denegri-Knott et al. 2012), holding meaning and value to participants. "Digital meaning may not be bound to a particular good, but it is still bound to materiality" (Denegri-Knott et al. 2012, p.88). Participants were protective of their mobile phones, demonstrated through careful handling and measures taken to preserve the mobile phone, such as purchasing a protective case. Participants expressed a duty to take care of their mobile phones, in order to protect the digital content that was contained. Diana is very protective of her mobile phone, to the extent that the very first thing she does with a new mobile phone is to get a case for it, "so it doesn't get scratched". As a customer of the mobile phone provider EE, Diana sees her mobile phone to be owned by them, something that she sees as beneficial if her mobile phone were to break. Here, Diana demonstrates the length she goes to in order to protect the valuable digital content:

"I don't understand why people would buy the handset. I feel like then it's fully your responsibility, and that would worry me. Because I pay for a contract, I feel like if anything happened to my phone I could just take it to the EE store and they'd fix it, but if you buy it outright then you can't do that. That's what would worry me about buying it outright... I see it as being EE's. And that's why I have my case, because I'm scared of breaking it. It's a practical thing, there's no great sentimental attachment to the handset, more what's on it."

Furthermore, the written biography of Emily demonstrated the care taken to protect her mobile phone. Emily is a 19-year-old university student studying at the University of Southampton. Similar to other participants, she claims the digital content holds great value to her. In her written biography, from the perspective of her mobile phone, Emily describes the lengths she goes through in order to protect her mobile phone, thus protecting her digital content:

"I also have access to all of Emily's memories, her photos and her text messages from over a year ago... She's dropped me more times than I can remember, but I remain undamaged. This is because Emily has bought me a glass, smash-proof screen protector and phone case to keep me safe. Also, Emily has insured me."

Existing research has highlighted the metaphorical meaning that material possessions hold to consumers (Kopytoff 1986). However, our findings propose that the mobile phone is a literal vessel of meaning, holding and protecting the valuable digital content. With mobile phones containing valuable digital content, it is imperative that the mobile phones remain undamaged to ensure that the digital content is protected. Digital content is dependent on the condition and "performance" (Denegri-Knott et al. 2012, p.88) of the physical mobile phone. There

is a risk with a mobile phone that "physical transfer may fail, and data may become lost or corrupted" (Denegri-Knott et al. 2012, p.88) if the device became damaged in some way.

Furthermore, participants had no issue with gifting their old mobile phones to friends and family once their contracts had been fully paid, signalling the end of participants' attachment to their mobile phone. This was clearly depicted by Diana. Her first mobile phone was bought by her husband and still remains special due to the memories that she links to this mobile phone. However, she claims there is "no sentimental attachment" to subsequent mobile phones, leading to perfunctory displacement of old mobile phones, including gifting them to her friends:

"Well they just go in the drawer. I remember once I went back to the store with my phone to exchange it because that's what I thought you did but the woman was like 'oh no we don't need that, it's yours'. I just put them in a drawer really. I think I gave one to one of my friends, it's a wicked waste otherwise really."

Gifts are presented to others voluntarily (Belk 1979), and existing research has suggested that people expect something to reciprocate their gift. For example, Giesler (2006) found that consumers who share music feel obliged to "contribute to the community, not just take from the community" (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). Our data contrasts this notion, with the idea that participants become detached from their mobile phones once meaning transferral, (whereby digital content is transferred to another device), has occurred. Due to this, participants did not expect anything in return for gifting their old mobile phones to family members or friends. The gifting of old mobile phones to family members and friends can be seen as a divestment ritual, whereby a once 'sacred' possession is transformed into a profane object in the eyes of the original owner (Belk et al. 1989) once the transaction has occurred.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The first aim of this paper was to understand a consumption object's biography in situations where no transfer of ownership takes place. Past research has suggested one of two ideas; objects have just one biography (Kopytoff 1986; Epp and Price 2010) affecting the object's place in its biographical stage, or that objects have multiple biographies, due to many different owners (Jenkins et al. 2014). Our data suggests that mobile phones have two biographies, that of the mobile phone and that of the digital content. The biography of the mobile phone was ephemeral, with attachment ending alongside the completion of the mobile phone contract. However, the biography of the digital content demonstrated ongoing singularization, being transferred to additional devices to ensure its continued use. Furthermore, we have highlighted the different relationships that are had with the mobile phone and the digital content, and how this affects the biographical stage. Future research could draw focus to multiple biographies in other possessions that consumers regard with high value, to determine whether this is a prevalent theme among many possessions. Furthermore, theorists have identified the movement of possessions back and forth throughout biographical stages in the context of a single biography of a possession (Epp and Price 2010). Through the identification of two biographies

within a single object, further research could explore how the movement of possessions is affected by the presence of multiple biographies.

Secondly, the research aimed to explore the relationship that consumers have with their mobile phones as cherished possessions. We discovered that participants place greater value on their digital content than their mobile phones, to the extent that participants will transfer their digital content to additional devices to ensure preservation. This contributed to the ongoing singularization of the digital content, long after the mobile phone had been replaced. Participants expressed that their mobile phones held limited meaning. This was displayed at the two-year mark, when participants gifted the mobile phones to others, or stored the mobile phones in drawers for an indefinite time. Existing literature has shown the symbolic meaning of possessions (Kopytoff 1986; McCracken 1986; Belk et al. 1989) which transfers seamlessly through consumers, possessions and cultures (McCracken 1986). Our data identified the literal meaning that the mobile phone carried, in the form of the valuable digital content. Lengths were taken by participants in order to preserve the digital content. This was demonstrated through the transferral of digital content to other devices, and through the purchase of a protective case. This prevented the mobile phone becoming damaged and the digital content being inaccessible.

Overall, this research identified valuable results into the consumption of mobile phones as cherished possessions, namely the discovery of two biographies within a single possession. Limitations of the research include that the data was from nine participants. While this provided adequate data into participants' lived experiences, rather than producing data generalised to the whole population, future research could replicate the study with a larger participant group to yield a broader range of experiences. These findings were confined to a contractual mobile phone. Following this, further research could apply the same methods to another partially-owned possession. In doing so, this could explore the presence of multiple biographies co-existing in a single possession, and the effects this has on its network and biography.

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