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The Role of Identity in Disposal: Lessons from Mothers' Disposal of Children's Possessions

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Abstract

This study uses depth interviews with mothers about their disposal of children's possessions to craft a new understanding of the role of identity in disposal. Our study asks: *How does identity influence the disposal process of ordinary possessions?* A disposal identity continuum of keepers and discarders emerged from the data. This new understanding suggests that disposal involves decisions regarding the match of possession to mother, partner, child, and family identities. When disposal identities lead to conflict between the actors in the disposal decision, decision-makers use coping strategies such as subterfuge, avoidance, forced choice, and training / discussion. In addition, the disposal process can lead to negative emotional outcomes such as ambivalence and guilt for both keepers and discarders.

Keywords: disposal, disposition, identity, motherhood, extended self

Disposal is "the separation of people from their things" (Gregson et al., 2007, 187) that comes at the end of the consumer behavior stages of acquisition, consumption, and disposal (Hanson, 1980; Jacoby et al., 1977). Disposal of possessions includes both the physical and the psychological processes that separate an object from its possessor (Roster, 2001). Although marketing research is as likely to study acquisition as consumption, disposal receives much less attention (Coulter and Ligas, 2003; Parsons and Maclaran, 2009; Roster, 2001). More than thirty years ago, marketing researchers began to ask for increased attention to disposal issues (Jacoby et al., 1977); this call has been repeated every decade or so (e.g., Hanson, 1980; Harrell and McConocha, 1992; Lastovicka and Fernandez, 2005).

This study takes up the challenge to examine disposal as a fundamental marketing activity and, more importantly, to tie consumers' disposal choices to the "complexities, conflicts, and challenges of identity construction" (Ahuvia, 2005, 172). Although identity is a key marketing construct, it usually has been developed in the context of acquisition or consumption (e.g., Bonsu and Belk, 2003; Gao et al., 2009; Kozinets, 2001; Mehta and Belk, 1991; Newholm and Hopkinson, 2010; Schau et al., 2009; Schouten, 1991; Shanker et al., 2009; Thompson, 1996; Tian and Belk, 2005). That research stream provides rich explanations about how individuals acquire and consume products to construct desired identities and to signal those identities to others (Berger and Heath, 2007). For example, mothers' identities may be constructed and signaled through the purchase and use of prams (Thomsen and Sørensen, 2006), children's clothing (Collett, 2005), and convenience products (Carrigan and Szmigin, 2006). While a few studies have explored the role of identity in specific disposal practices such as clothing swaps (Albinsson and Perera, 2009) or among segments such as voluntary simplifiers (Cherrier, 2009), little is known about the role of identity in the broader context of the ongoing disposal of ordinary possessions.

We situate our study of disposal within the life-world of motherhood – specifically, mothers' disposal of children's possessions. We chose this context because women are often defined by their roles as mothers (Bailey, 1999; Hogg et al., 2004). Becoming a "good mother" is a central identity project for many women (Collett, 2005; Johnston, 2007), although each woman may define what a good mother is differently. Consequently, the concept of motherhood is key to understanding the identities of many women. In addition, a focus on mothers allows us to examine the interactions between mothers, children, and other family members in the disposal decision.

Another important factor in our choice of context is the sheer volume of things that children amass and then, in quick succession, no longer need. As Gregson et al. (2007, 188) note:

> The practice of parenting, for example, alters inexorably as children age, and as children age the objects used to enact parenting change too, as the world of prams, cots, and buggies is overtaken by one of walkers and toys, and thence bikes, computers, Play Stations and mobile phones.

Gregson (2007) suggests that children's accommodations within households are constantly in a state of change; items are continuously monitored and evaluated, and routinely gotten rid of. In a disposal survey of consumers (Hibbert et al., 2005), 100% of respondents with children reported disposing of toys and children's clothing in the last year. Thus, within the life-world of motherhood, mothers must regularly make many choices about disposal while attempting to enact and negotiate their identities.

This study asks: *How does consumer identity influence the disposal process of ordinary possessions?* The study uses depth interviews with mothers to answer this question, starting from the packrat versus purger dichotomy uncovered in previous research (e.g., Coulter and Ligas, 2003). Interview findings extend this dichotomy, and demonstrate that identity has a profound impact on disposal decisions. Conflicts and coping strategies are an inherent part of disposal, and the outcomes of disposal provide more opportunities for negative emotion than is suggested by previous marketing research.

DISPOSAL AND IDENTITY

Past research regarding disposal has generally focused on disposal channels (Gregson et al., 2007; Harrell and McConocha, 1992; Hibbert et al., 2005; Jacoby et al., 1977); such studies present taxonomies of disposal options (e.g., storage, selling, donating to charity) and the decision-making processes that may lead consumers to each. Disposal is said to occur when a product meaning does not match a consumer's current identity (Kleine et al., 1995; Roster, 2001). This could be because the consumers' self-image has changed or because the possession's meaning has changed (Belk, 1988; Lastovicka and Fernandez, 2005). For example, Thomsen and Sørensen (2006) describe a mother who disposed of an inexpensive pram because she came to associate it with lower-class neighbors.

Much disposal research has been conducted in the context of major life transitions such as graduation, marriage, moving, or retirement (Albinsson and Perera, 2009; Belk, 1988; Mehta and Belk, 1991; Roster, 2001; Young, 1991). During such transitions, identity changes as consumers acquire new roles. As illustration, the construction of mother identity is considered to be one of the most significant identity transformations of adulthood (Johnston, 2007); women must lay aside other aspects of identity to develop their new role as mothers when their first child is born (Bailey, 1999). For example, a new mother might dispose of a Vespa scooter because it cannot practically transport a child. Similarly, women undergo another identity transformation after their youngest child has left home (Hogg et al., 2004), also spurring disposal; women in these "empty nest households" may dispense with regularly preparing traditional family meals.

Previous research on disposal and identity has resulted in a body of work that takes as its context adults who dispose of cherished possessions because of a major life transition. Many of the singularized objects studied in these contexts have deep, personal, idiosyncratic meanings and are valued independently of their exchange value (Epp and Price, 2010; Grayson and Shulman, 2000; Richins, 1994). Individuals attempt to find homes for prized possessions, creating an ongoing sense of identity and shared meanings (Price et al., 2000). Much research has examined the disposal of special possessions by older consumers divesting in anticipation of their final years (e.g., Bradford, 2009; Curasi et al., 2004; Price et al., 2000) giving us tremendous insight into this once-in-a-lifetime event.

Ordinary products, those that might be described as mundane or every-day, do not elicit as much attention from marketing researchers (Coupland, 2005; Hetherington, 2004) and have rarely been linked to identity (Kleine et al., 1993). Such possessions abound in consumers' cupboards, closets, and spare rooms; they are underfoot and piled on the dining room table. Compared to the disposal of priceless heirlooms, the disposal of everyday items happens more frequently and regularly; Hibbert et al. (2005) note that, in their disposal survey of consumers, 84% of respondents indicated their reason for disposal was general "clearing up," not a major life transition such as moving. However, we know little about the role of identity in this common type of disposal. Consequently, this study focuses

on the disposal of ordinary possessions; these objects may be liked, but are not priceless or irreplaceable. This type of regular disposal does not take place in times of great role transition, but in the mundane spaces of everyday life.

Packrats Versus Purgers

The scant research (Coulter and Ligas, 2003; Hanson, 1980; Harrell and McConocha, 1992) on the role of identity in the disposal of ordinary possessions has dichotomized consumers as either: (a) packrats[1] (also called chronic keepers) or (b) purgers (also called trashers). The definition of such disposal identities has relied on behavior: "packrats… are people who, from a behavioral perspective, keep things, and from a psychological perspective, have difficulty disposing of things" (Coulter and Ligas, 2003, 38). Purgers exhibit opposite behaviors.

In describing each type of disposer, Coulter and Ligas (2003) found that packrats often keep items for perceived future functional value and for personal meanings associated with objects. When disposing, packrats are more interested in finding a good home for their possessions than with monetary return. Packrats are often characterized as older individuals who like to fix things instead of disposing of them (Hanson, 1980); thus, even when packrats are aware of a mismatch between a possession's meanings and their own identities, they still may be reluctant to dispose. Because of this reluctance, packrats are often regarded negatively, as cheap, messy, disorganized hoarders (Coulter and Ligas, 2003) who waste resources by holding on to unused items that could be utilized by others (Harrell and McConocha, 1992). Packrats may be more likely to be men and to have less than a college education (Harrell and McConocha, 1992). However, in contrast to the research findings just discussed, Harrell and McConocha (1992) found that packrats tend to be *younger* individuals who are not concerned with the welfare of others (such as in donating) and are *more likely* to want an economic return for their possessions.

Purgers have been characterized as younger, single individuals (Hanson, 1980; Harrell and McConocha, 1992) who continually take stock of whether items are needed and are less anxious about disposal; they consider themselves future-oriented (Coulter and Ligas, 2003). However, purgers are sometimes regarded as wasteful and lazy consumers (Coulter and Ligas, 2003) who constantly replace items irresponsibly without consideration of consequences (Harrell and McConocha, 1992).

Although the dichotomy of packrats versus purgers appears to be a parsimonious way to describe the role of identity in the disposal of ordinary things, it lacks definitional and conceptual precision. In addition, it oversimplifies complex disposal identities into only one of two options. Nonetheless, we start with this model, as some of the only work in the area, in hopes that we can expand and refine it through interviews with consumers who daily face a myriad of disposal decisions while struggling to maintain their desired identities.

METHOD

Depth interviews were conducted with 13 mothers who had children between the ages of 2 and 18 living at home. Participants were not engaged in major life transitions, such as new mothers (i.e., with children younger than 2) or empty-nest mothers (i.e., adult children have recently left home); our focus is on the disposal that occurs throughout parenthood. We emphasized disposal of ordinary objects by explicitly telling participants that we were interested in discussing ordinary gear including baby furniture, clothes, toys, sports equipment, school supplies, books, and electronics. Disposal was defined as throwing an item out in the trash, giving it away, selling it, storing it, or any other way that a participant might get rid of an object.

Based on previous research about mothers' disposal experiences (author cite withheld), we believed that we could find both packrats and purgers even within a fairly homogeneous group of mothers. Thus, we kept the demographic profile of our participants consistent to explore identity within a shared lifeworld. We excluded fathers because research suggests that women bear a disproportionate share of household and childcare responsibilities (Thompson, 1996), including disposal (Carrigan and Szmigin, 2006). All of our participants were in stable partner relationships-- one in a same-sex marriage and the others in opposite-sex marriages. We focused on mothers in partner relationships so that we could explore potential disposal conflict between family members. Our participants were all of middle- or upper-class status; such mothers are especially likely to believe that daily choices are important in influencing the

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[1] "Packrat" is an informal term commonly used to refer to someone who keeps or collects many different things even when they are not useful or valuable.

character of their children (Collett, 2005). We interviewed stay-at-home mothers as well as those working outside the home in part-time and full-time positions. Participants' occupations varied widely but are not reported here to protect confidentiality. Interviews were conducted in North America. Brief participant profiles are presented in Table 1; names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

We recruited participants through personal contacts and continued through snowball sampling; some participants were previously unknown to the researchers. To start the interview, participants were asked to describe themselves, their families, and their daily activities. Next, participants were asked to describe how they perceived themselves as mothers, and to describe their parenting styles. We then turned to disposal questions, including questions about when and how often they disposed of children's possessions, how disposal decisions were made, what changes in disposal had occurred over time, and ideal storage and disposal methods. Participants discussed what they thought their disposal practices said about them as mothers and what they would like to teach their children about disposal. Final open-ended questions probed for differences in disposal channels (e.g., donating to charity versus throwing in the trash). We allowed packrat vs. purger identities to emerge from the data if they were present in the lived experience of our participants. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Data were analyzed using the grounded theory method (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) where key findings are allowed to emerge from the data. Line-by-line analysis was used to identify emergent themes. The constant comparison method ensured consistency and allowed identification of non-confirming cases. The two authors used an independent, iterative approach to analyze the interviews, moving back and forth between examining each interview in depth versus examining a cross-section of several interviews at once. Analysis focused on uncovering intersections of disposal and identity. Preliminary themes were discussed by both authors, tested, expanded, and refined as the analysis progressed. Analysis continued until no further ideas emerged and all of the data could be encompassed. Findings were provided to participants for member checks; participants indicated that no content changes to the manuscript were required.

FINDINGS

Eleven of the thirteen mothers in this study indicated that they were the person primarily responsible for disposal of their children's possessions. For most participants, men are absent or only helpers in completing disposal tasks; men can be involved in disposal decisions about larger items, or they drop items off at charities. The mothers we interviewed indicated that disposal of ordinary possessions takes place in the context of daily living as well as an ongoing series of mini-transitions. These transitions are often tied to changes of seasons, and to stages of their children's physical (e.g., clothing), and psychological (e.g., books) development. A common trigger is when items appear to be underfoot.

> Rebecca: We realize the fact… that we no longer need them, use them, want them….It's more reactionary….It starts to get in my way. It starts to bug me.

We start our discussion by deepening and extending the understanding of the packrat / purger dichotomy; next, we explore what role these disposal identities play in the disposal process. Finally, detailed profiles of two participants are presented as exemplars of the role of identity in disposal.

The Keeper / Discarder Continuum

Our analysis confirmed that the mothers in our study differed in tendencies and willingness to dispose of items; therefore, the current study supports the packrat / purger disposal identity, with some changes and extensions. First, we find the previously-used descriptive labels (e.g., packrat, hoarder) to be pejorative; prior research presents negative stereotypes associated with each. Thus, we substitute the term 'keeper' for packrat, and 'discarder' for purger, because these new terms are less negatively-valenced and emotionally-charged.

Second, even within our fairly homogeneous group of mothers, we found strong variations in disposal identity as a keeper or discarder. Findings of previous research that attempted to relate definitions of packrats and purgers to demographic or behavioral characteristics have been mixed; we believe a better conceptual definition of keepers and discarders is needed. Consequently, we define keepers as those individuals who have strong, emotional relationships with many possessions (Fournier 1998); using Belk's (1988) terminology, a greater number of products make up the

extended selves of keepers. Recent research by Cherrier and Ponner (2010) suggests that keepers are more likely to connect events and people to possessions. Consequently, keepers, such as Diane, have a difficult time, psychologically and behaviorally, disposing of possessions.

> Some of the stuff, rather irrationally, I just can't get rid of. So I have formed some emotional attachment to a particular stuffed animal or something that represents one of the boys at a particular stage in their childhood….What I have difficulty giving away points to how emotionally invested I am in the kids, how…much of a back story there is to some of the items that have taken on some kind of significance for me about a developmental stage or a trip we took.

Such a conceptual definition, with a strong focus on identity, trumps a behavioral definition, as even the most ardent keepers easily dispose of objects that lack strong connections to identity.

> Diane: Plastic junk is very disposable and there is all kinds of ephemera that they get everywhere—sports teams, McDonald's Happy Meals—that you really don't buy. Birthday party grab bags, that kind of stuff. I have no guilt about it. It almost comes directly in the house and practically out to the garbage.

Discarders have strong emotional relationships with fewer possessions and consider fewer objects to be part of their extended selves. Maggie, a discarder, explains:

> I… don't want to attach too much meaning to inanimate objects….I try not to be materialistic.

Even the most extreme discarder in our study kept some meaningful objects, such as photographs, journals, and baby items. Paula, also a discarder, notes:

> Books are the hard one for me. I don't get rid of many books.

All participants are identified on the keeper / discarder continuum in Table 1. One of our participants was an 'extreme' keeper (Kelsey) and one was an 'extreme' discarder (Gwen); we describe them in the individual case studies of the next section. We also identified 'strong' or 'moderate' keeper or discarder tendencies among our participants. Therefore, we do not find the keeper / discarder identity to be dichotomous, but arrayed on a continuum. Thus, consumers can have more or fewer possessions that make up their extended selves, and stronger or weaker emotional product relationships. This is a key point of our findings, because it breaks open the simple dichotomy of disposal identity in previous research and allows for a deeper understanding of the complexity of disposal identity.

Although presented as a fixed individual difference characteristic in the previous literature, we find that the keeper / discarder disposal identity can change over time; several of our mothers discussed how their tendencies for one type of disposal identity have been overcome by conscious decision-making. Based on her overall interview, Brett is labeled in Table 1 as a moderate keeper, but Brett felt she made a stronger effort to dispose of items in the present than she had in the past because of the negative consequences of keeping.

> I had this really great Fisher-Price dollhouse…for years….Then a couple of years ago, [my mom] gave it to me….It was sentimental to me. I wanted my kids to play with it. But it was already starting to break, so it actually went into the garbage not so long ago. I was sad about it, but what are you going to do with a broken dollhouse that nobody wants to play with?

Similarly, Rosemary identified a previous negative experience as a catalyst for her disposal identity shift from moderate keeper to moderate discarder:

> My mom does hoard and still hoards everything, like plastic bags. We had to move her and dad out of their house and had to throw [items] away [for] hours and hours. I think that was probably one of the turning points—the amount of unnecessary stuff. She still resents me for throwing out the bags.

Thus, Brett and Rosemary provide examples of how inherent tendencies for one type of disposal identity can be overcome by self-reflective behavior.

Identity Conflict in Disposal

If disposal were a simple matter of discarding unwanted personal identities, disposal decisions should be fairly straightforward. However, participants described a great deal of conflict over disposal decisions. Prior literature has examined disposal decisions on an individual basis; we suggest such decisions frequently involve the identities of significant others—in this case, partners, children, and members of the extended family (Hetherington, 2003). We further suggest that family consumer behaviors, including disposal, are complicated by issues of agency and surrogacy (Cook, 2008; Downey and Catterall, 2009); that is, some members of the family, particularly children, have limited power to act in their own interest and are reliant on others. Epp and Price (2008, 52) define family identity as being created through "shared interactions among relational bundles within the family that engage in both complementary and competing consumption practices"; as illustration, research shows that women attempt to create collective identities through both furniture purchasing (Reimer and Leslie, 2004) and food production (Moisio et al., 2004). We extend the idea of family identity to include shared identities created through disposal.

Consequently, when a mother contemplates disposal of a child's possession, she may consider how the possession's meaning matches the many parts of the family identity:

(a) mother's identity:

Jennifer: I do have a Rubbermaid[2] tote downstairs of some baby clothing—it won't mean anything to [the children]….But they don't remember it, so when I take it out they just look at it and say, "You can get rid of this too."

(b) children's identity:

Katie: If it was something that was special to them, I would probably be more inclined to keep it. But if it was something that they didn't really ever get attached to or don't really play with, then I don't.

(c) partner's identity:

Maggie: I'm a purger and he's a keeper, so it's always a balancing act. I did agree that we would keep one bucket of the perfect toys and I said I wouldn't throw out any books.

(d) overall family identity:

Lili: We have never been a family of owning too much.

Usually, then, a possession's meaning must fail to match several distinct identities before disposal will occur.

However, we observed an exception to this identity match-up rule. Even when one actor's identity *matches* the possession's meaning, disposal still may occur if the mother decides that the matched meaning is undesirable. That is, she may consider not only the *actual* meanings of possessions for members of her family, but her *desired* meanings for them. We suggest that mothers dispose of possessions to avoid communicating undesired identities (Berger and Heath (2007). For example, Rebecca notes that she told her son "this is a little kid's toy" to spur his acceptance of disposal. This finding regarding disposal parallels that of Rawlins (2006) regarding consumption; he observed that mothers dictate their children's clothing consumption to signal acceptable identities to the world.

Naturally, disposing of children's possessions to create a desired identity can create conflict between mothers and other family members.

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[2]Rubbermaid is a brand of storage containers. Several participants appeared to use the brand name as a generic term for large plastic storage tubs with lids.

> Lori: The girls—that's where it's hard to get rid of their stuff because they have an attachment to it. If you show it to them, of course they are not going to want to get rid of it.

> Maggie: I feel like I'll get in trouble from [partner's] parents. For example, my mother-in-law made [the children] these outfits….I can't get rid of that….They're keepers, right? I mean they're appalled as it is with how little I keep and the fact that I don't scrapbook every thirty seconds of their lives.

Mothers in our study used several strategies to cope with such identity conflict, and use of these strategies was related to a mother's disposal identity as keeper or discarder. With younger children, discarders often used the strategy of *subterfuge*: disposal of children's possessions without the children's awareness. In this way, mothers fulfilled their identities as discarders without endangering family harmony.

> Jennifer: There are things that I just get rid of when they're not looking and hope it doesn't come back to me. They've never really noticed anything gone because I don't get rid of their favorite things.

Surprisingly, this strategy was used with grandparents and partners as well:

> Paula: The conflict comes in when [in-laws] keep bringing more stuff….We're not really ones to hold onto a whole lot of stuff and a lot of it is just junky cheap toys that really are clutter. We've talked to them about it and my mother-in-law, particularly, continues to bring it. So we just smile and say "thank you" and get rid of it. I mean, I have a little bit of a dilemma with that. You feel guilty about just throwing things away, but what do you do?

Keepers described using a coping strategy of *avoidance*: delaying or putting off making the disposal decision.

> Lori: I suppose that's what I am trying to avoid by not getting rid of some of the kids' things—that they may come up and ask for later. So you know there is the potential for conflict that I try to avoid.

Often the avoidance strategy involved storing items.

> Brett: Sometimes I put stuff in bags if I'm not sure if I want to dispose of it and we put it somewhere… because sometimes you're not ready. You're not really sure if you want to get rid of it.

Storage has been identified as a key divestment ritual (McCracken, 1986) in the disposal process that leads to a loss of meaning for the object in storage and paves the way for later disposal (Roster, 2001).

A conflict coping strategy used for older children by both keeper and discarder participants was *forced choice*: targeting of a set of items for disposal, allowing a child to keep a few possessions from the set, and disposing of the rest.

> Diane: [Partner] makes a cull of everything. Then we all come down, very sadly, and look at this collection of things that are on the potential auction block and see what we can and can't live without, and that seems to keep the kids pretty happy. So they're not terrorized that stuff is being taken from their room and it's gone.

The final coping strategy, described by all the participants in our study, was *training*: teaching children appropriate and acceptable disposal practices. This disposal training fits securely into a mother's perceived responsibility to teach her children important values regarding possessions (Cook, 2008); it also reduces disposal conflict as, over time, children's disposal patterns begin to mirror those of their mothers. Although all of our participants mentioned the importance of training, what they were teaching about disposal depended on the mother's disposal identity. Angela, a keeper, said:

My main goal is to make sure that they appreciate and take care of what they have.

Maggie, a discarder, describes what she wants to teach her children.

It's just a dress—who cares? So I often use that language—it's not important. It's just a thing. It doesn't define you….They have to learn to get rid of stuff so that they can be free.

When disposal conflicts arise between mothers and other important adults, the strategy of training is replaced by *discussion*. As Diane notes of her partner, "We have many, many discussions about how to get rid of stuff."

Alternatives to Disposal

Our participants attempt to control disposal by controlling acquisition and consumption. That is, mothers acquired less and consumed less so that they could dispose of less. Our participants described disposal as effortful and involving work that they wanted to minimize. Curbing consumption is one way that mothers attempt to make the work of disposal less daunting and helps keeper mothers accumulate less:

Brett: I'm not a big recycler. I'm not very good at recycling…My opinion would be all those people tout recycling, but often it's the same people who shop at Wal-Mart. They buy garbage products in the beginning that break after the first or second use and then they throw it out and they buy more, and they're just over-consuming. We try to say, let's buy quality so it doesn't have to break so we don't have to throw it out.

Marketing research has often separated the study of acquisition and consumption from the study of disposal (Coulter and Ligas, 2003; Jacoby et al., 1977; Roster, 2001). However, our analysis suggests that theoretical barriers between acquisition, consumption and disposal are illusory.

Emotional Outcomes of Disposal

Previous research on disposal suggests that loss of possessions such as through theft or catastrophe may cause trauma, grief, and mourning, but disposal of ordinary possessions should not stimulate negative emotions (Belk, 1988). Instead, consumers "gladly" or "eagerly" dispose of them (Lastovicka and Fernandez, 2005) or may experience "simple nostalgic regret" for possessions that have been associated with happy memories (Belk, 1988). In contrast, our analysis suggests that mothers experience ambivalence in the context of everyday disposal decisions. Ambivalence is the experience of feeling conflicted or torn in relation to an attitude object (Roster and Richins, 2009). For example, both the replacement purchases of durable goods (Roster and Richins, 2009) and wedding planning (Otnes et al., 1997) trigger ambivalence when decisions reveal differences between one's attitudes and attitudes held by important others. Although our participants experience some ambivalence because of a mismatch of disposal identities with important others in their lives, as discussed in the conflict section of this paper, they report experiencing even greater ambivalence resulting from conflict between their own identities and perceived social and cultural expectations. Participants described feeling a great deal of guilt about disposal decisions. Surprisingly, this guilt and ambivalence was described by both discarders and keepers.

Keepers feel guilty for not always displaying the identity of an organized and "in-control" mother. Our society has seen a remarkable shift toward the positive elevation of product disposal as evidenced in the publication of self-help books with titles like *Absolutely Organized: A Mom's Guide to a No-Stress Schedule and Clutter-Free Home* to reality television programs like *Clean Sweep*. This cultural perspective suggests that timely disposal of possessions is necessary to maintain a healthy household. Historically and culturally, clutter is associated with dirt, pollution, disorder, and decay (e.g., Belk et al., 2007; Gregson et al., 2007; Maycroft, 2009), and hoarding can be perceived as unhealthy or pathological (e.g., Kellet et al., 2010).

Keeper mothers in our study are aware of the cultural expectation that disposal is healthy, and they feel guilty for not meeting this expectation. When asked what the ability to dispose says about a mother's identity, Lori, a keeper, answered:

> Your ability to emotionally detach, your discipline. If you're a well-disciplined person you just do it and then you can be disciplined in all sorts of different ways.

Keeper mothers who were unable to demonstrate such self-discipline and organization felt ambivalence and guilt about their disposal decisions.

> Conversely, discarder mothers felt ambivalence and guilt because they discarded too many possessions.

> Paula: Sometimes I think that maybe I'm a little too hasty to get rid of things…because sometimes I think maybe I'm not being sentimental enough.

Mothers are expected to be intimately connected to their children and, by extension, to the possessions that those children use. As Johnston (2007) notes, intensive mothering expectations define our culture's dominant mothering ideology. Mothers wish to exemplify the "good mother" identity which involves serving as the child's central caregiver, and attending to the child in ways that would be considered child-centered, emotionally absorbing, and labor-intensive (Hays, 1996). We observed that discarder mothers feel ambivalence and guilt because disposal of children's possessions does not typify the good mother who records and saves key pieces of her child's identity.

Mothers are expected to be emotionally attached to possessions that make up their children's extended selves, as well as disciplined and organized at removing unnecessary objects from the household. These conflicting cultural expectations may be one of many of the paradoxes women face in defining themselves as mothers. As Firat (1994) argues, modern women are subject to "paradoxical indoctrination"; that is, they are given contradictory messages about how they should behave. Thus, neither keepers nor discarders feel like they are disposing appropriately.

We observed that both keepers and discarders felt ambivalence not only about how much they disposed but also about the choice of disposal methods. Relying on elaborate criteria, participants sorted objects and gave some objects to friends, family or charities, while some objects were recycled or thrown away. Thus, even when routinely disposing of everyday items, participants employed elaborate decision-making heuristics, and they devoted considerable time and energy to completing disposal tasks. However, mothers were not always able to use preferred distribution channels because such preferred methods took more time and energy than throwing items in the trash.

> Maggie: Sometimes it's more convenient….If I find a plastic ball, or something, and it doesn't have a pair or a set….I'm likely to throw it out. Don't tell the recycling police.

In summary, participants felt considerable ambivalence because of conflicting cultural expectations. This ambivalence is compounded by a fear of not using socially-acceptable disposal methods. All of these factors led to guilt as a common outcome of disposal.

Case Studies in Disposal

In this section, we present two case studies of individual participants to provide a detailed description of how each woman's identity influences disposal. To provide rich illustrations, we have chosen to examine an extreme keeper and an extreme discarder.

Extreme keeper: Kelsey. Kelsey is a 40-year old woman with a five-year old daughter. Kelsey's current life project is building a loving connection with her daughter. Although her career was important to Kelsey in the past, she and her partner have made lifestyle sacrifices to allow Kelsey to be a stay-at-home mother. Kelsey's family identity is one of old-fashioned values, simplicity, and outdoor pursuits.

> Kelsey's personal disposal identity is toward the extreme end of the keeper continuum.

> As far as clothing…probably every six months there's one little thing that I like to keep and I have my little box of trinkets….I have one little Rubbermaid container for every few years. And now that school has started that's getting bigger because now I'm keeping all the arts and crafts from Kindergarten….I've gotten rid of very few toys; I've boxed up more than I've gotten rid of.

She has kept all of her daughter's books, school work, pictures, and crafts.

> I don't want to get rid of it before I know exactly what I want to keep, and I don't know that yet. So it's a lot more manageable to just keep a Rubbermaid for every year of school and just stack it up. Eventually, I'll go through it….Maybe when she's ten. I would do the first couple of years because I'd have a different perspective on it by then. Right now, it's all too fresh, I think, and everything is a masterpiece to me. It's like, "she really drew that?" and I'd like to keep that.

She disposed of her daughter's baby items (e.g., crib) only when she and her family moved across the country. Kelsey's keeper tendencies are amplified by the fact that her daughter is an only child, not by choice, but by circumstance.

> [Daughter] is by herself, so at every stage I don't get that stage again and I'm aware of it. I have a hard time letting go of each stage.

Before disposal, Kelsey carefully considers a product's meaning in relation to her own identity, her daughter's identity, and her family identity. Kelsey identified only one possession that was easy for her to dispose of—a fashion doll that had been given to her daughter as a gift.

> There are certain products that we don't allow in our house because I don't think that they're appropriate….I don't think that dolls being marketed with a whole bunch of makeup on and suggestive clothing are appropriate for a five or a six year-old….It was very awkward for [daughter] to watch that transpire. I was there and the neighbor brought it and she looked at me and she's like, "Oh." You could tell she genuinely didn't want it.

When a product's meaning is clearly mismatched with personal, child, and family identity, Kelsey does dispose of it. But for Kelsey, such a clear disposal decision rarely emerges.

Kelsey has little conflict with her daughter over disposal because she keeps many possessions as part of their extended selves. She does use the coping strategy of *training* to align her daughter's disposal strategies to her own.

> She has a real respect for her toys; her toys don't get broken or banged up and she really genuinely cares about them….I guess when she looks at how I dispose of them….I'm not just obliviously throwing things away, right? So maybe it teaches her to cherish things more or to appreciate things more.

Kelsey has some conflict with her partner, who is not a keeper, but this causes little ambivalence because after many years of *discussion*, her partner respects her disposal style.

Kelsey experiences more ambivalence resulting from cultural ideals of the organized, controlled mother:

> I'm not kidding myself; I know I can't keep this up. But I only have one [child], so that makes it a little more manageable….I have to be realistic because my house will become a little cluttered mess if I don't [dispose], but like I said…I have a hard time letting go of each stage. So ideally, yeah, I would maybe be a little stronger at letting some things go.

Because she feels torn, another coping strategy Kelsey utilizes is *avoidance*:

> There are times when I'm really sad…and I don't deal with it right away….So things that I was packing away because she outgrew—that was just a whole stage. Like she wasn't going to be four anymore….I knew I couldn't deal with it 'cause I would literally tear up and it was just so hard. So I just put it all in bags and put it away, but at least I got her room clean.

Finally, Kelsey uses consumption strategies to control the need for disposal. Because disposing of possessions is so difficult for Kelsey, she limits the products that her child acquires.

> She isn't one of these kids that gets, especially electronics. We have been very limited to electronics in our house. I just don't see the need I guess. I stay at home so, financially, I find places where I save money and one of them is in toys. Most of her toys probably are either hand-me-downs or gifts.

In summary, Kelsey expresses her identity as a connected mother through the keeping of many items associated with her child's extended self. Disposal is difficult for Kelsey, as she has strong relationships with possessions, except when these possessions clearly do not match her family identity. She limits her need for disposal by controlling her daughter's consumption, and avoids disposal decisions by delaying disposal through storage. Her partner's disposal identity is a small source of ambivalence, but cultural expectations—that she dispose to avoid a cluttered, messy house—cause more guilt.

Extreme discarder: Gwen. Gwen is a 34-year old mother of three children between the ages of 5 and 12. Gwen has a demanding career, as does her partner, and the family identity centers around a busy, active lifestyle in pursuit of individual interests. Gwen's current life project is fostering independence in her children; for example, she allows the older children to bike to the community swimming pool by themselves. She is focused on preparing her children for the financial realities of life—explaining to them the costs associated with running a household and paying them market wages for cleaning the house and babysitting.

Gwen's personal disposal identity is toward the extreme end of the discarder continuum. Gwen has a specific disposal schedule tied to the seasons and she demands that items be disposed of on a timely basis.

> The first Friday after Easter we would both take the day off and go through the house cleaning it out….It's in our calendar and we know we're going to do it that day so it's never hanging over our heads…

Gwen keeps very few of her children's possessions:

> On the last day of school, my kids come home with their school supplies. And the first hour after the last day of school they spend sorting through their school supplies that they know are going to be good for next year. Absolutely everything else gets thrown away or burned and we have a big bonfire….We burn it on the last day of school.

She feels a strong relationship with few possessions and finds few possessions part of her extended self.

> There are a few things in our home that are extremely valuable to me that if I ever lost them I would be very upset. We kept journals for the kids when they were first born….If our house was on fire….the only things I'd leave with are my kids, my husband, the dog, and those three journals. Really, if everything else burned to the ground, I wouldn't care. We have the kids' ultrasound videos from when we taped them—those could burn; I wouldn't care. We have [daughter's] little cardigan she wore to her baptism; again, I don't even know where it is. I've kept those things because I know at some point they'll like to see them, but those journals are pretty much the only thing….I don't need to touch the thing; I don't need to see or hold it to have any value.

> Gwen uses the strategies of *forced choice*:

> I think it's freeing for [the children] because they get to make an initial decision of assessing what they have and making space in their room for new things, so it's kind of fun and energizing. So they make the initial decision. Then, my husband and I go through each of their bedrooms plus our common toy area and we say, "These are also things we think we can get rid of. These are toys we haven't seen you playing with; these are things that you have too many of."

training:

> My son had one project he saw me putting into the fire last summer…and he said, "Mom, you can't throw that away. I worked on it. We can't burn that!" So I let him keep it. I said, "Fine, put it

in your room. But in two months, you're not going to care about it anymore and then it's going to be recycling"….I just want them to let go of things and not feel some attachment to a toy or a project or a piece of paper.

and *controlling acquisition and consumption*:

We're very lean and mean around here….Like you buy it if you need it and you're gonna use it. And if you're gonna use it, you're gonna use it 'til it's valueless to anybody else.

Gwen also considers her family identity as an important factor in each disposal decision. A good illustration of this is a conflict she had with her son over his wish to replace his older iPod with a new iPod Touch. Gwen usually supports her children's desires to dispose; she allows her children to sell personal items and use the money to acquire new things. However, Gwen is opposed to her son's potential disposal of the iPod.

He keeps coming to me with this iPod and he says he hates the iPod and he hates that it is old. His friends have a new one and he wants a new one. We have overridden that….There is definitely conflict between us and our oldest son around acquisition of new things like he really is very, very acutely interested in what the new technology is and who has it….There is an ongoing conflict between the two of us negotiating and trying to get him to forget about and leave behind the idea that these things are valuable.

Thus, it is not the disposal of an electronics product that Gwen opposes, but the acquisition of its replacement. Instead of disposing of the iPod because it is *not* important to him, Gwen's son wishes to dispose of the iPod because a new one is *so* important to him. Her son's wish to make an iPod Touch part of his self-identity goes against Gwen's desired family identity of little attachment to things. Consequently, Gwen forbids disposal that contradicts the family identity.

Gwen's disposal identity as a discarder does not match her partner's identity as a keeper. Her partner engages in the *avoidance* coping strategy.

If he weren't married to me, he'd be a complete packrat. I know his first inclination is just to—it's not to hold onto things because they're valuable—it's because he doesn't want to make a decision about it right away….The conflict we would have isn't over the final result, it would be the time that we do it. I know it drives him crazy that on the last day of school when he wants to take the kids for ice cream, I'm sitting there with a fresh piece of paper making them test every marker. And if the marker is broken, you have to throw it away.

However, Gwen feels little ambivalence from this mismatch of disposal identities because her husband accommodates Gwen's disposal strategies. Unlike other participants, Gwen reported feeling no ambivalence resulting from cultural expectations.

In summary, Gwen expresses her identity as a discarder mother who fosters independence in her children and eschews materialism in her family through timely disposal. Gwen copes with identity conflict with her children through *forced choice*, *training*, and *controlling acquisition*. Her partner's disposal identity is a minor source of ambivalence. Cultural expectations that she become a more sentimental mother cause little guilt, although Gwen is aware of them. Gwen sums it up this way:

I want them to catch on that in burning things…you go through life with a lighter load.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study heeds the call to bring disposal back into mainstream marketing theory by exploring it as a key activity of the acquisition-consumption-disposal cycle of consumer behavior. Through our interviews with consumers, we tie disposal to personal identity to deepen our understanding of the complexities and challenges of identity construction apart from the well-studied context of consumption. Furthermore, our study of identity through disposal moves

beyond cherished possessions to explore the disposal of ordinary possessions—those mundane consumer decisions that often fly under the radar of marketing scholarship.

Our analysis examines the lived experience of mothers as they dispose of children's possessions to craft this new understanding of the role of identity in disposal: *How does identity influence the disposal process of ordinary possessions?* The conceptualization of the continuum of keepers and discarders emerged from the data gathered to answer this question. This new understanding adds richness and depth to the previous packrat / purger dichotomy, and builds a new definition linked to the marketing literature on brand relationships and the extended self. We uncovered the idea that the identity of keeper or discarder is not permanently fixed, but can change through conscious reflection and choice. We also discovered that this identity influences behavior, including conflict coping strategies, and the consumer socialization messages given to children.

Another key finding of our study is that disposal is the site of perpetual identity strain, as a constellation of identities—both actual and desired identities—has to be considered in the disposal decision. The match of a possession to mother, partner, child, and family identities are ongoing in a series of mini-transitions. When disposal identities lead to conflict between the actors in the disposal decision, decision-makers use strategies such as subterfuge, avoidance, forced choice, and training / discussion. In addition, the disposal process can lead to negative emotional outcomes such as ambivalence and guilt for both keepers and discarders based on cultural expectations regarding what is appropriate for mothers. Thus, we uncovered much more negative emotion in the disposal of ordinary possessions than previously supposed.

This study raises intriguing questions that can only be answered through further research on disposal. Our participants said that male partners played only minor roles in the disposal of children's possessions. However, in our study, the male voice is filtered through the mother's narrative accounts because we choose to interview only mothers. This leaves many questions unanswered such as: How does the male partner's identity interact with the meaning of a disposed possession, especially when that possession falls into a traditionally masculine domain such as automobiles, electronics, or sports equipment? How do men and women's identities compete or conflict in such cases? Do men use different strategies to handle conflict in disposal situations? Similarly, our findings cannot generalize to all mothers. The voices of single-parent or divorced mothers might add additional insight into conflicts and coping strategies. Exploring how disposal experiences differ among mothers of children of various ages, various ethnicities, and various religions would add additional richness to the findings. However, the main variation we observed in disposal identity (keeper vs. discarder) transcended the few demographic differences noted among our participants (i.e., work status, age of mother, family size).

In contrast to the dichotomous variable of purger / packrat discussed in previous research, we observed varying levels of keeper and discarder tendencies. In addition, we observed that disposer identity can shift based on past experience and conscious choice. A pressing need in disposal research is a measure of personal disposal identity based on a keeper / discarder continuum. A measure of disposal identity would allow exploration of associated trait measures; for example, perhaps keepers feel a greater aversion to loss (e.g., Tversky and Kahneman 1991). Such measures would advance theoretical understanding of disposal but would also have practical, marketplace value. The Container Store[3], for example, would be interested to quantify what percentage of the population are keepers and how to reach them using correlated demographic characteristics.

Our analysis suggests that the disposal process is fraught with emotion; disposers often experience ambivalence leading to guilt. However, our study is bounded by the context of motherhood; the feeling that one is not disposing as a good mother can lead to guilt. Future research can explore other negative emotions resulting from the cultural expectations for other roles. For example, how might men who are pursuing heroic masculinity (e.g., Holt and Thompson, 2004) feel throughout the disposal process? How do these men express their ambivalence about disposing of a possession that is a symbol of personal rebellion (e.g., hockey card collection, motorcycle) to meet a cultural 'breadwinner' expectation? How will employees who are able to assert their identities through the display of personal possessions at work (e.g., Tian and Belk, 2005) feel about the disposal of those items as they are replaced by newer souvenirs and collections? What role do cultural expectations about the appropriateness of certain possessions in the workforce play in the resulting ambivalence? The answers to these questions would provide rich context for the study of negative emotion in the disposal process.

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[3] The Container Store is an American retailer that sells storage units and systems.

Future research also might explore further cultural associations between identity and disposal *methods*. Several participants discussed the control of acquisition and consumption as a way to reduce disposal, but few addressed environmental concerns directly. Although all participants stated that they threw items in the trash as a last resort when they had no other method of disposal available to them, some participants (e.g., Diane, Brett, Maggie) seemed weary of environmental concerns. Different groups of consumers may feel more or less cultural pressure to use green disposal processes, based on demographic factors (e.g., age and education) or values (e.g., environmentalism). Thus, while environmental concerns created another source of ambivalence for our mothers, the extent to which such concerns create positive motivation for other groups of consumers is a question for future research. Future research might examine disposal in different geographic areas, given that North America is often characterized as a more 'disposable' society.

In conclusion, this study answers the call for a deeper understanding of both disposal and identity in marketing research. It asserts that theories of disposal should not disengage from knowledge about acquisition and consumption. And it proposes that the keeper /discarder continuum of disposal identity provides a base from which to study the disposal process, including its conflicts, coping strategies, and emotional outcomes.

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TABLE 1

Description of Participants

Name[a]	Age	Work status	Children (age)	Personal Disposal Identity[b]
Angela	49	Full-time	Boy (16) Girl (15)	Strong Keeper
Brett	37	Part-time	Boy (11) Girl (10) Girl (7)	Moderate Keeper
Diane	43	Full-time	Boy (8) Boy (5)	Strong Keeper
Gwen	34	Full-time	Boy (12) Girl (10) Boy (5)	Extreme Discarder
Jennifer	33	Stay-at-home mom	Boy (7) Boy (5) Girl (2)	Moderate Discarder
Katie	32	Stay-at-home mom	Boy (10) Girl (7) Boy (5)	Moderate Discarder
Kelsey	40	Stay-at-home mom	Girl (5)	Extreme Keeper
Lili	52	Full-time	Boy (18)	Moderate Keeper
Lori	38	Part-time	Girl (6) Girl (4) Pregnant	Strong Keeper
Maggie	37	Full-time	Girl (5) Boy (2)	Strong Discarder
Paula	37	Full-time	Girl (5) Girl (3)	Moderate Discarder
Rebecca	35	Full-time	Boy (5) Boy (3)	Moderate Discarder
Rosemary	46	Full-time	Boy (13) Girl (10)	Moderate Discarder

[a]To protect participant confidentiality, names have been changed to pseudonyms.

[b]Participants were identified along the keeper / discarder continuum based on (a) the number of children's possessions they elected to keep, as opposed to discard, and (b) the emotional difficulty or ease of their disposal decisions.