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## Towards a Taxonomy of Divestment. The Lifespan of Products as a Process

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**Abstract:** This paper presents findings of research focused on the divestment of material possessions. It argues that divestment can be better understood as a process instead of a moment in the lifespan of a product. The term divestment refers to the process through which owners separate physically or emotionally from their possessions. Using qualitative data obtained through the Photo-Elicitation Interview method, the study explores the experiences of people on three types of items: clothing, furniture and mobile phone aiming to understand how the separation between owners and possessions occurs. The results were systematised to build a taxonomy of divestment. This taxonomy analyses the divestment process as a negotiation between value-waste, capturing the moments in which the value of a product increases or decreases. The taxonomy consists of five different categories: physical divestment, virtual divestment, keeping/no use, irregular use and in use. The categorisation of these moments through the taxonomy allows to identify moments for interventions in the lifespan of products to promote more sustainable ways of divestment. It also becomes a useful tool for understanding the complexity of product's lifespan and possible interventions for promoting more sustainable ways of consumption.

### Introduction

The present paper analyses the divestment of material possessions as a process. The concept of divestment refers to the process through which owners separate physically or emotionally from their things. Starting from the premise that the lifespan of products is determined by different factors that affect their longevity, this article suggests that, to understand better the events between the purchase and the disposal of a product and their influence in their longevity, divestment should be studied as a process.

The rise in consumption and the subsequent increase in waste generation is becoming the biggest challenge for sustainability (World Economic Forum, 2019; WRAP, 2017). The case of durable goods consumption represents an environmental problem since the acquisition and replacement of these items has increased consistently in the last years. As an example, the electronic waste, -the fastest-growing waste stream worldwide, has reached 50 million tonnes in 2018 (World Economic Forum, 2019). Another case that illustrates this issue is the clothing consumption, which in the United Kingdom grew from 950,000 tonnes to 1,130,000 in 2016 (WRAP, 2017, p. 9).

Contemporary solutions for sustainable consumption are framed around waste reduction through prevention, recirculation and through innovation as a tool to generate new products, processes and materials centred on technology and science (Jackson, 2006). Several studies have explored the possibilities of enhancing lifespans by improving the durability of products (Cooper, 2010). Significant progress has been made in specific areas of sustainable design supporting the notion that longer lifespans can reduce the environmental impact of overconsumption and waste generation. This study aims to contribute to find ways to boost sustainable consumption practices and enable the circularity of products and materials.

### *Lifespans of products and divestment*

Post-acquisition stages of products have been gaining relevance in the last decade since recent studies have revealed how longevity of products is not exclusively a matter of performance and durability in goods. These studies have provided insights for a better understanding of sustainable consumption practices through the optimisation of "efficiency and sufficiency" (Cooper, 2005, cited in Cooper,

2010, p. 14) of products. One of these post-purchase stages is divestment.

In particular, previous studies on divestment (Encino-Muñoz, Sumner, Sinha, & Carnie, 2019; Glover, 2015; Gregson, Metcalfe, & Crewe, 2007) have identified the channels through which people divest their possessions. These studies also highlight the importance of routines and social interactions in this practice. Nonetheless, the events that shape the lifespan of products until they reach the *end-of-life* have been less explored.

For these reasons, a more comprehensive understanding of the divestment process is needed considering the fact that, under the frame of sustainable consumption and circularity, it is in this moment in which products can either enter into the waste stream or move into a new cycle for reuse or material recovery. Therefore, studying divestment can contribute to find ways for resources usage optimisation and waste management improvements.

## Methods

In order to unveil the complexity of the divestment process, this study used the Photo-Elicitation interview (Harper, 2002): a qualitative method that combines in-depth interviews with the use of images. This method helps participants to provide deeper and precise information. Given the importance of acquisition and replacement of durable goods, three categories of products were used as units of observation in order to follow participants' experiences in divestment practices: clothing, furniture and mobile phones.

A total of 30 participants were involved in the study. The data collection was carried out in two stages: (i) participants were asked to take a series of photographs prior to the interview, including three different items of each category: a recently acquired item, a cherished item, and an item to be discarded; (ii) a face-to-face interview where the researcher enquired in-depth about divestment experiences in order to find relevant events that influence the lifespan of products.

Divestment, as one of the post-acquisition stages, has the possibility to connect with three important moments in consumption: with acquisition stages (through the replacement of goods); with retainment activities and with disposal (waste generation). Hence, by including these three different moments in the consumption spectrum, it was

possible to address the aim of constructing a taxonomy of divestment.

## Findings and discussion: A Taxonomy of Divestment

Findings of the study show that divestment is a dynamic and non-sequential process. The study aimed to intersect different stages in the consumption spectrum on the grounds that, divestment is a process resulting from the coexistence and conciliation of two concepts: value and waste. It is for this reason that a taxonomy for divestment is proposed. A taxonomy is a particular system of classifying things. Hence, divestment taxonomy classifies the value-waste negotiations that occur during the lifespan of a product.

Data from interviews suggests that some of the divestment elements can be found in the initial stages of products' lifespan, showing that divestment is not a straightforward individual decision and it does not follow an established pattern. This complexity derives from the fact that there are activities that are part of social life that can interfere with former decisions, accelerating or slowing the divestment process. In some of these cases, the user is more a passive agent than an active one. Hence, events that strongly impact the divestment practices can be shaped in the early stages of products. By gathering participants' experiences and classifying them, it was possible to build a taxonomy of divestment organised in five main categories (Figure 1).

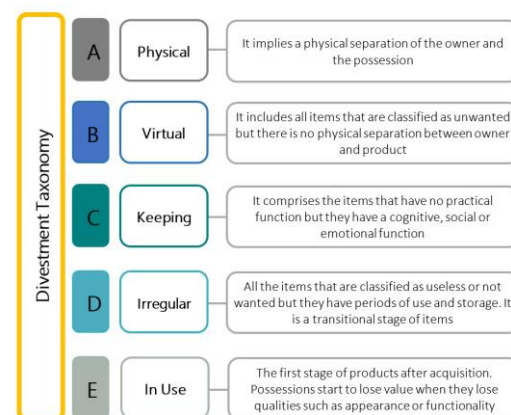


Figure 1. Categories in the Divestment Taxonomy

### Describing the classes in the taxonomy

The five categories in the taxonomy include different subcategories comprising the main factors that influence the lifespan of products.

To illustrate better each category, some examples extracted from the data were added.

#### A) Physical divestment

This is the most tangible type of divestment since it implies a physical separation and it holds no conflict between the decision-action dichotomy. In physical divestment, the intention of divesting an item and the action required for doing so, come together.

In this category, three main reasons for divesting items were identified: (i) function: when there is a significant failure that prevents the object from working, (ii) self-identification termination: when the owners feel that the object does not longer correspond to the self-image or their circumstances, and (iii) inappropriateness: it encloses items that are no longer suitable for a specific set of conditions (i.e. it is not the right size, it is not fashionable).

In addition to the functional failures in items, there are more complex cases, for example, an interviewee declared as a valid reason for getting rid of a piece of clothing that “someone younger than her needed to wear it”, illustrating the case in which owners think an item does not represent them anymore.

#### B) Virtual divestment

It includes all items that users classified as unwanted but they still own them. As opposed to physical divestment, in which there is a spatial separation between the owner and the possession, virtual divestment is not manifested through physical separation, but a mind-set that leaves the item out of its normal use. No further action towards a physical divestment has been executed:

*“...It is really hard to find where to recycle electronics, I can see it here at my work but not as part of my personal habits. My wife still owns some previous phones and we don't know what to do with them...”*

This is what a participant declared when talking about the reasons why he was still keeping old mobile phones. These experiences helped to identify three different types of restraints when the owners have decided to get rid of their items but something prevents them to do so: (i) Material restraints: when the person has identified a way to get rid of the item but cannot find an appropriate way for doing so; (ii) knowledge restraints: when the user has no knowledge on how to deal with the unwanted item and it is kept until the information is

gathered; (iii) time restraints: when users have enough information on how to divest the item but the time required to do so prevents them of doing so.

#### C) Keeping / no use

One of the most complex categories in the taxonomy, the keeping class comprises all the possessions that participants labelled as “ready to go” and without having any material, knowledge or time constraints, they were still keeping them even when there was a clear loss in the value of the item compared to when it was new.

Different reasons for saving the items were identified in this category: (i) psychological or cognitive function: some items helped to consolidate memories or relationships, they produce emotional evocations; (ii) social function: items that remain in the brain as a manifestation of connections with other moments and practices in people's life. A case in this subcategory is explained by an interviewee who describes why is he keeping a piece of clothing after not wearing it for a long period:

*“...this jacket was a gift from my girlfriend. I have had it for four years and in the beginning, I was wearing it for her, but not anymore... I never liked it and it has to go because I don't like it. It should not be in my closet; I think I would get rid of it now...”*

Finally, the last subcategory in this class is when item is kept because the person still perceives some material value in the item. Even when the object is described as not usable, the owner keeps it because she/he considers that some parts and/or after fixing the object, could still have some functionality.

#### D) Irregular use

A stage in which possessions have lost some value but the owner is still in the process of making a choice while occasionally using the product. In this category the item could be pre-selected for a physical divestment, however, actions have not been done towards this. The main difference with the virtual divestment is that, in the *irregular use* class the owner still uses occasionally the item and reflects constantly about practicing a physical divestment.

*“...I decided that I did not want it anymore four years ago but, last year I wore it a couple of times... I can wear it with many*

*outfits... This is why is hard to get rid of it, it is a life saver, that is why I keep it but, if I don't force myself to get rid of it, the new item will never enter in my life, because the back-up is always there..."*

*The Irregular use category can be a point for preventing divestment because the value of the item is still being constructed. Some other participants mentioned that through reflection they decided to take their items back to the regular or normal use category. Sometimes this action prevents items from divestment, in other occasions it leads to their virtual divestment.*

### *E) In use*

During this phase, the owners start to negotiate the value of the items. Throughout this stage, value is expressed in two ways: based on the item's function and on its appearance, linked to the aesthetic and to its identity elements. After a "normal" use of the item, it starts losing some of its value and it becomes an item of (i) second class use: items that have partially or totally lost their function or the appearance does not longer match the minimum required to be used; or (ii) third class: items in this category have been reduced to its minimum functionality and they are not used in social spaces. As an example, clothing in this category is used for housework and furniture is relocated to places out of sight:

*"...What I do sometimes is to keep a pair of trousers to do some work at home, for example, painting the walls or something similar..."*

### **Conclusions**

Findings of this study indicate that divestment can be gradual or abrupt according to the type of juncture or change that occurs to people in their lives. A gradual divestment indicates that possessions start to slowly lose some of their value, as it was shown through the different categories of the divestment taxonomy. An abrupt divestment can also occur when moments in life make the items lose the value that the owner previously conferred to them. Both of them are intersections of practices.

The circularity of materials and products is an important strategy for sustainable consumption because it allows the reintegration of products and materials to the

commercialisation channels, preventing that unused utility becomes waste. At the divestment stage, the opportunity to facilitate the circularity arises. It is at this moment that it is possible to enable the unwanted items to be recirculated.

The categories and subcategories of the taxonomy allow to identify moments for intervention to promote more sustainable ways of divestment and how these interventions could be carried out. Considering that not all products follow the same path, the taxonomy becomes a useful tool for understanding the complexity of product's lifespan and a way to know better the factors that influence the divestment practice.

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