



What are the meanings behind clothing attachment?

A product experience investigation in baby boomers

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Introduction: As of 2016, the number of baby boomers in the U.S. reached 81.3 million (CNN, 2017). Despite the large amount of individuals in this generation, there is relatively scarce research—especially qualitative research—focused on the baby boomer consumer group (Moschis, 2012). Based on the framework of product experience, this study explores consumers' product experiences that are associated with consumer-clothing attachment. This qualitative investigation will offer opportunities to marketers and designers who seek to better understand the experiences behind clothing attachment in older consumers.

Literature Review: A product experience relates to all affective responses in human-product interaction (Desmet & Hekkert, 2007). The authors distinguish three dimensions of product experience: (1) *aesthetic experience*, (2) *emotional experience*, and (3) *experience of meaning*. Since the emotional bond with a product cannot be created/sustained without character or an aesthetical appeal (Chapman, 2005), it is expected that the physical appearance of the product (i.e., aesthetic experience) and the emotions experienced in the interaction with those products (i.e., emotional experience) play an important role in the creation and development of product attachment. In particular, clothing acts as means of transmission of information about the wearer, thus the appearance of these products can communicate, for instance, social and cultural background, relation to others, among other types of messages (i.e., experience of meaning) (Damhorst, 1990).

Methodology: In order to address the research purpose, the following research questions were developed: *What are the product experiences participants have with clothing to which they feel strong levels of attachment? How would participants describe the aesthetic, emotional, and meaningful experiences with those possessions?* Upon IRB approval, data collection took form of in-depth interviews with older baby boomers. Out of all baby boomers, older baby boomers refer to those individuals born between 1946 and 1955 (Euromonitor, 2005), which represented a significant portion (24.62%) of the total U.S. population by 2015 (Colby & Ortman, 2015). As a result, the purposive sample was comprised of 18 participants who currently reside in the U.S., with an average age of 67 years. Interviewees were asked to bring to the interview at least 4-6

photographs of the clothing that they felt most attached to. Interview questions explored the experience of participants with the selected items. Each participant received \$30 in compensation. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed via categorization and thematic analysis.

Results and Discussion: Data interpretations suggest that experiences with products engendering high levels of attachment are mainly created, developed, and maintained via meaning, rather than aesthetics and/or emotions. That is, when exploring evoked positive emotions in the interviewees, as well as descriptions of the aesthetic characteristics of their favorite possessions, hidden meanings (e.g., stories behind the objects) emerged. Most meanings were symbolic in nature, especially for female participants. *Symbolic meanings* were classified as relating to *identity* (e.g., the jacket reminds Participant 2 of when she was skinnier), *personal history* (e.g., pants reminded Participant 9 about a trip to Disney with her son), *group affiliations* (e.g., the ring connected Participant 1 with her family ancestors), and *social standing* (e.g., the shirt provided status to Participant 2, as a professional soccer referee). For example, several participants mentioned symbolic meanings associated with their children, as most of them are all grown up and living far away. Such is the case of Participant 16 that explained how his daughter gave his favorite shirt to him. He said, “It hooks me up to that moment... happy memories.” By keeping and wearing that shirt, he feels happiness and connection with his daughter.

Instrumental meaning was also important in the creation and development of clothing attachment, mainly for male participants. Instrumental meaning was classified as strong associations with an *activity*, like hobbies (e.g., gardening for Participant 12) and day-to-day activities (e.g., staying at home for participant 7), or *experience* (e.g., Participant 10’s coat served as a sleeping cover during a trip). For example, participants reported clothing items that signify their new lifestyle after retirement; such as Participant 12. She explained how her favorite scarf is instrumental in her practical life as a retiree, “It goes with everything that I wear, a lot of my colors. I’m pretty careful about the colors I wear. It’s just been a lot of fun. It’s great. I can grab it and wear it. If I’m cold, I can wrap up in it. It’s turned out to be just one of those things that I just really love.”

Conclusion: The main affective responses in human-product interaction of older baby boomers with clothing they feel most attached with are related to experiences of meaning, which are bound to the emotional and aesthetic experiences with those items. Marketers and designers can gain insights into the types of stories creating strong emotional bonds between consumers and their most favorite clothing. Furthermore, by considering various types of meanings in the analysis, academics interested in product experiences may gain a further understanding of the dimension of meaning in human-product interaction.

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More references available upon request.