Finding a Home for Products We Love: How Buyer Usage Intent Affects the Pricing of Used Goods

Consumers often dispose of used products by selling them in a secondary market (e.g., classified advertisements, Craigslist, eBay). An important decision associated with this aspect of consumer behavior is the minimum price at which sellers are willing to execute an exchange. In addition to determining the initial listing price of a pre-owned item, sellers must often decide whether to negotiate with potential buyers who request a discount.

Among the multiple factors that may influence the price that sellers are willing to accept is the degree of emotional attachment they feel toward a product (Ariely, Huber, and Wertenbroch 2005). Indeed, consumers often grow attached to their possessions, including their cars, furniture, artwork, articles of clothing, books, and childhood toys (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). Attachment can influence sellers’ pricing decisions because consumers who become strongly attached to their possessions experience an aversion to the idea of parting with them (Frost and Gross 1993; Haws et al. 2011). As a result, when they must dispose of a product to which they feel attached, owners may attempt to offset their psychological discomfort by increasing their monetary gain from the transaction. According to this logic, as the strength of a seller’s attachment to an item increases, the item’s minimum acceptable selling price should increase as well.

Whereas prior research has focused primarily on one particular consequence of attachment, namely, the intensified reluctance of consumers to part with their possessions, this research identifies a novel consequence of attachment: a heightened sensitivity to the manner in which the product will be used following a transaction. Four empirical studies provide converging evidence that sellers’ product attachment determines the extent to which their minimum acceptable sales price is influenced by buyer usage intent.

Keywords: product attachment, secondary markets, pricing, product disposition

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ISSN: 0022-2429 (print), 1547-7185 (electronic)

Journal of Marketing
Vol. 76 (July 2012), 78–91
A key assumption of this research is that consumers often feel emotionally attached to their possessions—a phenomenon known as product attachment. We define product attachment as the psychological or emotional connection between a consumer’s self-concept and a tangible product. The notion of a psychological connection between a product and its owner dates back at least as far as William James (1890), who describes how possessions may be incorporated into the self-concept. Subsequent research has found that the unintentional loss of a possession may result in a diminished sense of self (Ahuvia 2005; Belk 1988), which illustrates how strongly consumers may become attached to their products. Indeed, compulsive hoarders experience such intense attachment that they feel unable to part with possessions even when an accumulation of clutter negatively affects their well-being (Frost and Gross 1993; Frost et al. 1995; Samuels et al. 2008). However, the effects of product attachment are not limited to hoarders; even normally functioning people exhibit a general tendency to retain products (Haws et al. 2011).

Prior research has implicated multiple factors that may contribute to a consumer’s sense of attachment toward a product. For example, recent research has suggested that the propensity to become attached to products increases with age (Lambert-Pandraud and Laurent 2010). Although product attachment often develops over a long period of ownership (Kleine and Baker 2004; Strahilevitz and Loewenstein 1998), even brief interactions with a product can generate some level of attachment. For example, mere ownership of a product can increase the favorability of consumer evaluations made soon after its acquisition (Beggan 1992) and raise consumers’ valuation of the item (Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1990). Product attachment might begin to develop even before acquisition, as suggested by the increased preference that stems from merely possessing an item (Sen and Johnson 1997), touching it (Peck and Shu 2009), considering the possibility of owning it (Ariely and Simonson 2003; Carmon, Wertenbroch, and Zeelenberg 2003), or assisting in its production (Fuchs, Prandelli, and Schreier 2010; Norton, Mochon, and Ariely 2011). Research on gift-giving suggests that attachment to a product can arise when a gift takes on symbolic meaning by signaling the donor’s regard for the relationship (Caplow 1984) or by reminding the recipient of shared experiences with the donor (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988).

Building on the notion that product attachment is multifaceted and can stem from a variety of experiences with a product, we suggest that attachment to a cherished object does not necessarily vanish even after consumers make the decision to dispose of it. Instead, we suspect that product attachment often extends beyond the transfer of ownership. Just as interpersonal attachment often persists even after people are separated from one another (Bowlby 1982; Weiss 1976, 1991), product attachment may persist when owners are separated from their possessions. The idea that the connection between a product and its owner can transcend the period of product ownership is corroborated by research on contagion, which suggests that products maintain a connection with former owners (Argo, Dahl, and Morales 2008; Nemeroﬀ and Rozin 1994; Newman, Diesendruck, and Bloom 2011; Rozin, Millman, and Nemeroﬀ 1986; Rozin and Nemeroﬀ 1990). Indeed, a description of the relationship between a product and its owner as “once in contact, always in contact” (Mauss 1972) is consistent with our view that an owner’s attachment to a product may linger during the disposal process or even after a product is sold.

The implication of lingering product attachment is that attached sellers may be concerned with more than just the objective monetary value of a used good. In the next section, we explore how strongly attached sellers’ concern for a product might lead them to make different decisions than weakly attached sellers when selling a product.

Product Attachment and Willingness to Accept
Is there a difference in the minimum price at which strongly and weakly attached sellers are willing to execute a transaction? Prior research has suggested that strongly attached sellers may unequivocally demand greater remuneration than weakly attached sellers, perhaps to offset the greater psychological cost they incur when parting with the object. For example, a study examining housing prices in the Boston area found that owner-occupants listed (and sold) their homes for a higher price than professional investors (Genesove and Mayer 2001). Although many factors might have contributed to this result, the authors acknowledge that differences in attachment between these groups of sellers may have been a particularly influential factor, noting that “perhaps, the psychological pain of selling one’s home exceeds that of selling a mere investment” (Genesove and Mayer 2001, p. 1247). Similar results to the Boston housing study have been obtained in other contexts, including the sale of sports memorabilia (List 2003) and even shares of corporate stock (Shapira and Venezia 2001).

A related stream of research on loss aversion and the endowment effect (Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1991; Tversky and Kahneman 1991) has produced robust evidence that product owners value their possessions more than nonowners and often refuse to sell them for the price the market dictates. Researchers have provided a host of explanations for this phenomenon, but a review of relevant research established that “there is evidence that affect-based attachment might be a central driver of the endowment effect” (Ariely, Huber, and Wertenbroch 2005, p. 136). Additional support for the notion that attachment inflates selling prices comes from research demonstrating that a longer duration of ownership, which has been linked to stronger product attachment, leads owners to charge higher prices for an item (Strahilevitz and Loewenstein 1998).

To test whether consumers’ intuitions regarding the relationship between product attachment and selling prices matched the findings of prior research, we conducted a brief survey with 65 participants from an online panel (61.5% female, mean age = 33.5 years). Half the participants were given the following scenario:
Imagine that Mr. A and Mr. B are each selling an identical baseball card, a rare 1951 Mickey Mantle rookie card in mint condition. Both are equally knowledgeable about baseball, but Mr. A feels stronger emotional attachment to his card because it was inherited from his beloved grandfather, an avid baseball fan. Mr. B is less strongly attached to his card because he received it from an acquaintance whose name he no longer remembers. Which seller is likely to ask for a higher price for his 1951 Mickey Mantle rookie card?

The other half of participants read an identical scenario, except attachment was counterbalanced such that Mr. B was described as being more strongly attached than Mr. A to the card. Across both conditions, 92% of consumers expected the strongly attached seller to set a higher listing price.

In summary, considerable empirical data spanning numerous contexts suggest that strongly attached sellers are more likely to charge a premium than weakly attached sellers. However, we found no published demonstrations of the converse effect—that is, circumstances in which strongly attached sellers were more likely than weakly attached sellers to discount their products. A primary contribution of this research is to identify such a circumstance, one that we believe occurs with regularity in buyer–seller interactions.

**Buyer Usage Intent**

As we described previously, prior research has focused primarily on one particular consequence of attachment, namely, the intensified reluctance of consumers to part with their possessions. In this research, we propose a novel consequence of attachment: a heightened sensitivity to the way the product will be used following a transaction. Our claim is that these two consequences of attachment may sometimes have opposite effects on the price sellers are willing to accept for their product. Whereas intensified reluctance to part with a product should motivate attached sellers to demand higher prices, heightened sensitivity to the future usage of a product may lead sellers to provide steeper discounts rather than higher markups, assuming the product is used in a manner that the seller endorses. Because they are concerned about “finding a good home” for their product, strongly attached sellers may be particularly attentive to the way a potential buyer intends to use the product. We refer to the indications of the specific way a potential buyer may be planning to use the product as buyer usage intent.

Why would sellers ever concern themselves with how buyers use a product following a transaction? Our view is that if sellers expect their feelings of attachment to linger beyond the transfer of ownership, they may feel responsible for finding a good home for the product. Thus, attached sellers may be motivated to evaluate the usage intentions of potential buyers so they can transfer the product to a buyer who intends to use it in a way they deem appropriate. Indeed, prior research suggests that one of the principles determining what types of exchanges are considered appropriate is the perceived way the good will be used (Medin et al. 1999). Recent work on the IKEA effect shows that valuations of products that consumers themselves help create (and to which they are therefore likely to be attached) are affected by the eventual fate of the product (e.g., whether the product is ultimately preserved or destroyed) (Norton, Mochon, and Ariely 2011). Related research on product disposition suggests that what a recipient does with a gift “may be intended (and is frequently perceived) as an expression of the recipient’s regard for the donor” (Sherry 1983, p. 165). Taken together, this work suggests that sellers are often aware of and concerned about how products will be used after the sellers dispose of them.

As buyers and sellers interact during the course of a transaction, the opportunity regularly arises for sellers to learn of a potential buyer’s usage intent. For example, buyers may ask a seller questions about how well the product would satisfy a particular need that they have. Such buyer–seller interaction is common not only in personal interactions (e.g., yard sales) but also in online transactions. For example, on its website, eBay encourages potential buyers to contact the seller and have their questions answered before making an offer or bid.

To empirically validate our claim that sellers are often aware of and consider buyers’ usage intentions, we conducted a pilot study with 144 U.S. consumers in an online panel (52% female; mean age = 33.1 years) who reported having previously sold items online (e.g., on eBay). Sellers were asked to reflect on their last transaction and recall whether potential buyers had communicated usage intent to them. The results indicated that 22% of sellers recalled that in the process of negotiating prices and exchanging information about the product, potential buyers had explicitly communicated to them how they intended to use the product. A representative response from this subset came from the seller of a chest of drawers, who indicated, “One [potential buyer] mentioned using it in his daughter’s room. Another potential buyer mentioned buying the chest to put into her bedroom to match the rest of her furniture.” A majority (55%) of sellers who learned of buyers’ stated usage intentions indicated that the usage intentions influenced the price they were willing to accept. Even when buyer usage intent was not explicitly communicated, 61% of all sellers reported that they inferred how buyers planned to use the product. Thus, when buyer usage intent is salient, it seems to influence the price sellers are willing to accept.

It is important to note that judgments about the propriety of various uses of a product are subjective; one seller may consider a particular usage inappropriate, whereas another seller may consider the same usage appropriate. Nevertheless, there are many instances in which a majority of sellers seem to share a common consensus about the appropriateness of a particular usage intention. In the next section, we focus on the relationship between product attachment and buyer usage intent and how their interaction affects the price sellers are willing to accept from potential buyers.

**Buyer Usage Intent and Willingness to Accept**

Building on the notion that sellers consider buyers’ usage intentions, our central hypothesis is that attached sellers’ perceptions of how a buyer intends to use a product can influence the minimum price they are willing to accept. In particular, we argue that sellers who feel strongly attached to a product often want to sell it to a buyer who will use it prop-
erly. Therefore, attached sellers may be willing to accept a lower price when they believe a buyer’s usage intent is appropriate, but they may also demand a higher price if they believe that a buyer’s usage intent is inappropriate.

Arkes (1996) provides preliminary support for such a view in a study on sunk costs in which participants were more likely to continue a failing project if the alternative was to sell project materials for their scrap value rather than to sell them at an identical price to someone who could use them. Although this suggests that considering a product’s fate can serve as a tiebreaker under conditions of financial parity, our stronger claim is that sellers may sometimes be willing to sacrifice profit to ensure that a product is used in a particular way. In addition, we aim to show that this willingness to discount is a consequence of sellers’ attachment to the product being sold. Thus, an important contribution of this research is to provide the first empirical demonstration that product attachment can sometimes lead sellers to discount, rather than inflate, the price they are willing to accept for a used good.

In summary, our theory aims to provide a more nuanced picture of how product attachment influences the price that sellers are willing to accept from potential buyers. In contrast to the implication from prior research that stronger product attachment will always lead to increased asking prices, we identify sensitivity to buyer usage intent as a novel consequence of attachment that can actually reverse the traditional effect of attachment. That is, when buyer usage intent is communicated, we expect sellers who are strongly (vs. weakly) attached to a product to demand a higher price, but only when they consider the buyer’s usage intent inappropriate. In contrast, when the seller deems the buyer’s usage intent to be appropriate, we argue that strongly (vs. weakly) attached sellers will be more likely to provide discounts.

Next, we report four empirical studies that test our prediction that product attachment and buyer usage intent have an interactive effect on the price that sellers are willing to accept for used goods. In particular, Study 1 examines whether attached sellers will sacrifice profit to sell to a buyer who expresses a proper usage intention instead of selling at a higher price to a buyer who expresses an improper usage intention. Study 2 investigates whether the strength of product attachment moderates the impact of buyer usage intent on the price that sellers are willing to accept. Study 3 is a field experiment conducted among sellers in a secondary market that explores whether strongly and weakly attached sellers differ in their willingness to accept discounts requested by buyers with proper versus improper usage intentions. Finally, Study 4 tests whether buyer usage intent differentially affects sellers’ choice of buyers for products whose market value is perceived to be identical but to which the seller feels different levels of attachment.

**Study 1**

The objective of Study 1 is to provide an initial demonstration that buyer usage intent can influence the decisions of attached sellers. More specifically, we examine how attached sellers choose between two buyers when the higher bidder expresses a usage intent that misaligns with seller preferences and the lower bidder expresses a usage intent that aligns with seller preferences. In contrast to a prediction that attached sellers will always seek to maximize profits, we anticipate that buyer usage intent may induce sellers to reject a higher bid in favor of a lower one. In this first study, we assume that the scenario presented to participants in our sample led them to be strongly attached to the product being sold. In subsequent studies, we relax this assumption and examine the interactive effect of product attachment intensity and propriety of buyer usage intent on sellers’ decisions.

**Method**

Eighty-nine participants recruited through an online panel were presented with a scenario in which they received offers from two buyers interested in purchasing a used piano. All participants were informed that the piano was a family heirloom to which they felt strongly attached. We manipulated buyer usage intent by telling participants that Buyer A planned to regularly play the piano (proper usage intent), but Buyer B planned to use the piano to enhance her home’s décor (improper usage intent). As we discussed previously, judgments about the propriety of a particular usage intent are subjective; however, we assumed that, on average, people would perceive it as more appropriate to play a piano than to use it strictly for decoration. A manipulation check at the conclusion of the study assessed the perceived appropriateness of each buyer’s usage intent on two separate sliders ranging from 0 (“completely inappropriate”) to 100 (“completely appropriate”).

To determine the impact of buyer usage intent on the piano’s selling price, participants were shown 11 pairs of offers from the two buyers. In one pair, each buyer offered $5,000 for the piano. In other pairs, the offers were unequal and became increasingly disparate until one buyer offered $3,000 and the other offered $7,000 (see Table 1). Each pair

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Notes: The first two columns present the pairs of dollar amounts offered by each potential buyer. The third column indicates the proportion of sellers who were willing to accept the lower offer when it came from the buyer who expressed improper usage intent. The fourth column indicates the proportion of sellers who were willing to accept the lower offer when it came from the buyer who expressed proper usage intent. The results indicate that many sellers preferred to accept a lower offer from a buyer whose usage intent was perceived as proper rather than to sell at greater profit to a buyer whose usage intent was perceived as improper.
of unequal offers was presented twice—one with Buyer A as the higher bidder and once with Buyer B as the highest bidder. For each pair of offers, participants selected the buyer to whom they would sell the piano.

**Results**

The manipulation of buyer usage intent proved successful: On average, participants rated the appropriateness of Buyer A’s usage intention significantly higher than Buyer B’s usage intention (M = 91.4 vs. M = 54.8; paired t(88) = 11.0, p < .0001), suggesting that playing the piano was considered more appropriate than using it for decoration. When responding to our manipulation check, 80% of participants reported that it was more appropriate to play a piano than to use it for decoration. In contrast, only 4% of participants believed it was more appropriate to use a piano for decoration. In the next study, we conducted a formal investigation of our proposition that strongly attached sellers are more likely to be influenced by buyer usage intent than weakly attached sellers. Specifically, we examined how the intensity of product attachment influences the extent to which sellers’ decisions are sensitive to buyer usage intent. Because of variation in people’s propensity to develop attachment (Ball and Tasaki 1992; Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995), we treated product attachment intensity as an individual difference measure in Study 2 and converged on

**Discussion**

Data from Study 1 show that sellers who feel attached to used goods may forgo monetary incentives to ensure that their product will be used in a particular way following a transaction. Specifically, when asked to choose between two buyers with different usage intentions, some sellers rejected the higher offer and instead selected the buyer whose usage intent better aligned with their usage preferences. Sellers’ choice of a buyer was significantly predicted by self-reports of the relative appropriateness of each buyer’s product usage intention.

The finding that buyer usage intent can induce sellers to sacrifice profits violates the widespread assumption that sellers’ decisions are primarily guided by an attempt to maximize profits (Monroe and Della Bitta 1978; Oxenfeldt 1973; Riley and Zeckhauser 1983). This assumption is particularly prevalent in the context of secondary markets, in which consumers reveal a profit-maximization motive through their decision to sell rather than keep, discard, or donate a used product. Furthermore, many secondhand exchanges consist of onetime transactions with relatively anonymous buyers. This lack of a previous relationship with a buyer, combined with the absence of any reason to expect further interaction, incentivizes sellers to evaluate each transaction in isolation and to pursue a pure profit maximization strategy. Thus, the results of this study are inconsistent with an explanation based on strategic reciprocity. On the contrary, finding that sellers in secondary markets are willing to sacrifice profit on the basis of buyer usage intentions constitutes a strong demonstration that product attachment can exert substantial influence on sellers’ pricing decisions—and cause them to discount rather than inflate the price at which they are willing to sell a used good.

In the next study, we conducted a formal investigation of our proposition that strongly attached sellers are more likely to be influenced by buyer usage intent than weakly attached sellers. Specifically, we examined how the intensity of product attachment influences the extent to which sellers’ decisions are sensitive to buyer usage intent. Because of variation in people’s propensity to develop attachment (Ball and Tasaki 1992; Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995), we treated product attachment intensity as an individual difference measure in Study 2 and converged on
this assessment in subsequent studies through alternate operationalizations of attachment.

**Study 2**

The objective of Study 2 is to investigate the interactive effect of product attachment and buyer usage intent on selling decisions. According to our theorizing, when product attachment is strong, sellers should be highly sensitive to the perceived (in)appropriateness of buyer usage intent. However, when product attachment is weak, the impact of buyer usage intent on the minimum price sellers are willing to accept should be attenuated.

**Method**

One hundred three residents of India, recruited from an online panel, were asked to imagine that they were selling “a rare book written by a famous 19th century Indian author.” To help participants understand the range of plausible prices for the book, we told them that two independent appraisers had recently valued the book at $760 and $990.

At this point in the study, we gauged the intensity of product attachment by measuring the degree to which sellers perceived the product to be connected to their sense of self. We did this using a modified version of the Inclusion of the Other in the Self scale, which has been used successfully to measure attachment in an interpersonal context (Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992). Participants were presented with seven Venn-like diagrams composed of two circles with differing degrees of overlap. In each of the diagrams, one circle represented the self and the other circle represented the rare book. Participants selected the diagram that best portrayed the relationship they perceived between themselves and the book, with the degree of overlap ranging from 1 (“weak attachment”) to 7 (“strong attachment”).

All participants were then informed that a wealthy Swiss buyer had offered to buy the rare book for $600. To manipulate usage intent, approximately half the participants were told that the potential buyer planned to place the book in the Indian Library Archives in New Delhi, India (proper usage-intent condition), and the remaining participants were told that the potential buyer planned to place the book in the American Library Archives in Washington, DC (improper usage-intent condition). The logic underlying this manipulation of usage intent was that study participants, who were all Indian, would consider it more appropriate for a rare book by an Indian author to be housed in India rather than in another country. To verify that our manipulation was successful, at the end of the study we asked participants to rate the perceived propriety of the prospective buyer’s usage intent on a scale from 1 (“extremely inappropriate”) to 8 (“extremely appropriate”).

As the primary dependent variable, participants indicated the lowest price they would be willing to accept from the Swiss buyer by entering a dollar amount in an open-ended text box. Participants were made aware that they were not being asked to provide a counteroffer to the initial $600 offer made by the Swiss buyer and were instead to indicate the lowest possible price they would accept.

**Results**

Our manipulation of buyer usage intent was successful; among both strongly and weakly attached sellers, the prospective buyer’s usage intent was rated as significantly more appropriate in the proper condition than in the improper condition (M = 7.1 vs. M = 4.7; F(1, 99) = 9.46, p < .01). This pattern was consistent for both sellers who reported feeling strong attachment to the book and for sellers who reported feeling weak attachment to the book (F(1, 99) = .40, not significant [n.s.]).

To assess our claim that product attachment moderates the impact of buyer usage intent on sellers’ decisions, we regressed the price that participants were willing to accept on their dummy-coded buyer usage intent condition (0 = appropriate, 1 = inappropriate), their self-reported attachment, and the interaction term. We found significant main effects of buyer usage intent (β = -.49, t(99) = 2.10, p < .04) and attachment (β = -.34, t(99) = 2.27, p < .03) that were qualified by a significant two-way interaction (β = .77, t(99) = 3.01, p < .01). This regression analysis indicates that the strength of the relationship between attachment and willingness to accept varied according to buyer usage intent.

To further isolate this interaction, we conducted simple slope analyses (Aiken and West 1991) by examining the slopes of attachment at each level of buyer usage intent. The slope of attachment was positive and significantly different from zero when buyer usage intent was improper, and the slope of attachment was negative and significantly different from zero when buyer usage intent was proper. Specifically, we found that product attachment significantly predicted willingness to accept from the buyer with an improper usage intent, such that sellers who were more attached to the book demanded a higher price from this buyer (β = .25, t(59) = 2.01, p < .05). Furthermore, product attachment also predicted willingness to accept from the buyer with a proper usage intent, such that sellers who were more attached to the book were willing to accept a lower price from this buyer (β = -.33, t(40) = 2.22, p < .05).

In addition, we followed the procedures Aiken and West (1991) and Fitzsimons (2008) recommend and performed spotlight analyses at plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean of product attachment. The planned contrast at one standard deviation above the mean of attachment showed a significant difference such that strongly attached sellers demanded a higher price for the book when buyer usage intent was improper versus proper (M_{Improper} = $685 vs. M_{Proper} = $522; β = .44, t(99) = 3.23, p < .01). A similar spotlight analysis at one standard deviation below the mean of product attachment showed that buyer usage intent had little impact on willingness to accept when product attachment was weak (M_{Improper} = $598 vs. M_{Proper} = $647; β = -.13, t(99) = .99, n.s.). Figure 1 depicts these results.

**Discussion**

Study 2 demonstrates that sellers who are strongly attached to products are more sensitive to buyer usage intent than sellers who are weakly attached. More specifically, compared with sellers with weak attachment, sellers with strong
attachment demand more (less) money from buyers with improper (proper) usage intentions. This result is important because, in contrast to the prediction based on prior research that strong attachment to a product causes sellers to charge a high price, we identified a condition in which attached sellers instead provided discounts.

Another important feature of Study 2 is that it allowed us to rule out experimental demand as an alternative explanation for the effect of buyer usage intent on sellers’ decisions. If participants were trying to anticipate how we expected them to use the information about buyer usage intent, no differences in willingness to accept would be expected across different levels of product attachment because all participants learned how potential buyers planned to use the book. However, the results suggest that only participants who exhibited strong attachment were sensitive to buyer usage intent. This observed interaction between product attachment intensity and buyer usage intent is inconsistent with an experimental demand argument.

It is important to reiterate that our theory does not require strongly and weakly attached sellers to differ in their perception of what constitutes proper and improper usage. Indeed, as we previously noted, both strongly and weakly attached participants in Study 2 rated the prospective buyer’s usage intent as more appropriate in the proper condition than in the improper condition. Instead, our claim is that strongly attached sellers are more sensitive than weakly attached sellers to differences in the propriety of usage intentions when deciding what price to accept from a potential buyer.

In the next study, we sought corroborating evidence for the underlying mechanism by using a different operationalization of product attachment. Building on prior research that suggests that consumers feel attached to products that help them maintain their self-concept (Ball and Tasaki 1992), we speculated that personal sellers (i.e., those selling their own personal property) may feel more attached to products than professional sellers because they are likely to have owned the product longer and to be reminded of personal experiences associated with it. Therefore, in Study 3, rather than measuring self-reported attachment, we used seller type (personal vs. professional) as a proxy for the intensity of product attachment. In addition, we attempted to establish greater external validity for the results by examining the impact of buyer usage intent on real rather than hypothetical pricing decisions.

**Study 3**

The objective of Study 3 is to demonstrate in a marketplace context that buyer usage intent influences the decisions of actual sellers who feel strongly attached to their products. We hypothesize that even when potential sales and real money are at stake, personal sellers are less inclined to accept a discounted offer if they learn that their product will be used improperly (vs. properly) by a potential buyer. However, we expect this effect to be attenuated among professional sellers, whom we assume to be less likely than personal sellers to be emotionally attached to the product for sale because they are less likely to associate personal memories with the product.

**Method**

Study 3 is a field study that used a 2 (buyer usage intent: proper vs. improper) × 2 (product attachment intensity: strong vs. weak) between-subjects design. Data were collected from 179 sellers on a popular e-commerce website on which secondhand products are commonly sold. All the sellers were located in the same metropolitan area and had listed a used car for sale within a predetermined 24-hour period with an asking price between $2,000 and $3,000. We e-mailed each seller and, in accordance with the website’s user agreement, inquired whether they would consider providing a discount of 15% on their car. The dependent variable was sellers’ willingness to discount the price of their car by 15%.

We operationalized product attachment intensity by using the website’s classification of sellers as either personal or professional. Because car dealers are likely to have less personal involvement with a particular car than individual car owners, we expected professional car dealers to exhibit weaker attachment to their cars than individual car owners. This assumption was supported by a pretest conducted with 44 sellers (20 professional sellers and 24 personal sellers) from the same population, who indicated the strength of their emotional attachment to the specific car that they had listed for sale on a scale ranging from 1 (“weak”) to 9 (“strong”). As we expected, individual car owners reported greater attachment to their listed vehicles than professional dealers ($M = 7.1$ vs. $M = 5.9$; $t(27) = 2.08$, $p < .05$).
We manipulated buyer usage intent in Study 3 by varying the appropriateness of the usage intention communicated to sellers in an e-mail message. Our assumption was that restoring used cars would be perceived by most sellers as more appropriate than disassembling them for parts. Therefore, sellers assigned to the proper condition received the following message: “I’m interested in restoring used cars to their original condition, and I just wanted to ask a question about yours. Would you be willing to sell your car for a 15% discount?” For sellers assigned to the improper condition, we changed the e-mail message to the following: “I’m interested in disassembling used cars for parts, and I just wanted to ask a question about yours. Would you be willing to sell your car for a 15% discount?” Sellers who responded to our request for information were e-mailed back immediately with a debriefing message.

We conducted a pretest of our manipulation of usage intent by surveying a separate group of 47 sellers of used cars (23 professional sellers and 24 personal sellers) and asking them to rate the appropriateness of each usage intent on a sliding scale ranging from 0 (“completely inappropriate”) to 100 (“completely appropriate”). The results of this pretest indicated that sellers considered it more appropriate to restore a used car than to disassemble it for parts (M = 70.0 vs. M = 55.8; F(1, 45) = 9.61, p < .01). Furthermore, this result was identical for professional and personal sellers (F(1, 45) = .02, n.s.), which suggests that different levels of attachment did not affect perceptions of usage propriety.

**Results**

We e-mailed 179 sellers who met the stringent criteria described previously (e.g., asking price between $2,000 and $3,000). Due to a disproportionate number of personal and professional sellers who met this criteria (109 personal sellers and 70 professional sellers), the cell sizes in our sample were uneven. Thus, of the 96 responses we received, 63 were from personal sellers and 33 were from professional sellers. However, the overall 54% response rate did not differ significantly according to seller type or communicated usage intent. Three of the sellers who responded reported having already sold their cars. We classified the remaining 93 responses as rejections if sellers explicitly indicated that they would not provide a 15% discount or if they proposed a counteroffer. Next, we classified responses in which sellers explicitly agreed to provide or consider providing a 15% discount were classified.

The results of Study 3 are consistent with our prediction that sellers’ willingness to accept a discounted offer depends on both the intensity of product attachment and the perceived propriety of buyer usage intent. As Figure 2 illustrates, buyer usage intent affected the selling decisions of individual car owners (strong-attachment condition), but not the decisions of professional car dealers (weak-attachment condition). We analyzed these responses using a logistic regression model in which the decision to accept or reject the 15% discount was given as a function of attachment intensity and buyer usage. The results revealed a significant interaction effect (Wald(1) = 3.48, one-tailed p < .05), suggesting that personal sellers are more sensitive to buyer usage intent than professional sellers.

Subsequently, we determined that the percentage of personal sellers who refused to provide the requested discount was significantly higher when the communicated buyer usage intent was improper than when it was proper (43% vs. 17%; χ²(1) = 3.89, p < .05). However, among professional sellers, improper versus proper usage intent did not affect the likelihood of refusing the discounted offer (25% vs. 35%; χ²(1) = .07, n.s.).

**Discussion**

Study 3 provides converging evidence for the role of product attachment on sellers’ pricing decisions. The results were consistent with our theorizing that sellers who expect to feel a lingering sense of attachment to a product will be affected by knowledge of how buyers plan to use a product following the transaction. Using a different operationalization of attachment, we replicated the pattern of results observed in Study 2 and found that compared with sellers who are weakly attached to their products, strongly attached sellers are more likely to be affected by buyer usage intent. Moreover, the strong external validity of Study 3 adds confidence to the generalizability of prior findings by providing evidence that actual pricing decisions made by sellers in a field setting are influenced by buyer usage intent. These data provide additional support for the notion that product attachment plays a role in how sellers are influenced by buyer usage intent.

In the next study, we sought to obtain additional insight into the mechanism underlying our effect by teasing apart
the independent effects of product attachment and intrinsic value on sellers’ willingness to accept. Our intent was to rule out a competing explanation for the previous findings by demonstrating that product attachment can affect sellers’ sensitivity to buyer usage intent even when sellers’ perceptions of an item’s objective value do not differ. Specifically, it could be argued that people are likely to be more strongly attached to items that have a high market value or that their perception of an item’s value is influenced by learning the usage intentions of potential buyers. In Study 4, we address this potential confound by explicitly measuring participants’ perceptions of the value of various items to show that the sensitivity of strongly attached sellers to buyer usage intent is not contingent on perceptions of monetary value and cannot be explained by such an account.

Study 4

The objective of Study 4 is to demonstrate that sellers’ increased sensitivity to buyer usage intent is driven by feelings of strong attachment to a product rather than simply by differences in the product’s objective monetary value. That is, even when the market valuations of two items are perceived as equivalent, variation in the strength of consumers’ attachment to those items should create different levels of sensitivity to buyer usage intent.

A secondary objective of Study 4 is to identify the salience of buyer usage intent as a boundary condition for our effect. We argue that when buyer usage intent is salient, sellers who are strongly attached will provide discounts to buyers whose usage intent is perceived as proper. In contrast, when buyer usage intent is not salient, we expect a replication of prior literature in which strong attachment increases consumers’ tendency to price items above market value, whereas weak attachment increases the tendency to price items below market value.

Method

Data were collected from 117 respondents (60% female; mean age = 33.9 years) recruited through an online panel that provides access to a diverse population of paid participants. Participants were first presented with a list of 12 common children’s toys and asked to indicate the toys that they owned or played with as a child. Participants were given the option of specifying up to two additional toys not included in the standard list. From the list of toys they selected or specified, participants then ranked each toy according to how emotionally attached they felt to it. For example, if they felt most strongly attached to “a set of building blocks,” this toy would be ranked first in the list. Participants also rated the strength of their emotional attachment to each toy on a sliding scale ranging from 0 (“not at all attached”) to 100 (“extremely attached”).

Next, participants were told to imagine that some of their old toys would be sold during a garage sale the following week. To understand their pricing intentions, we asked participants to determine the price at which they would list each toy relative to its market value. We captured responses on a sliding scale ranging from 50% below market value to 50% above market value, with a beginning position of zero (i.e., market value). Consistent with prior research, we expected that in the absence of any information about buyer usage intent, sellers would be more likely to list toys above market value if they felt strongly rather than weakly attached to them.

Participants were then randomly assigned to one of two conditions and probed further about a particular toy. Specifically, participants assigned to the strong-attachment condition were asked about the toy to which they were most attached, whereas participants assigned to the weak-attachment condition were asked about the toy to which they were least attached (according to their own rankings). For example, if a participant assigned to the strong-attachment condition had indicated feeling most attached to “a set of building blocks,” this specific toy would be referenced in subsequent questions.

To manipulate buyer usage intent, we informed each participant that during the garage sale, he or she was approached by two women of equal buying power who were each interested in purchasing the specific toy to which the participant was most or least attached (depending on condition). One of the buyers collected old toys and wanted to add the participant’s toy to her collection. The other buyer ran a professional day care and wanted to purchase the participant’s toy, presumably to replace a damaged or broken toy “since most of the toys [at the day care] don’t last more than one year with such heavy usage.” We assumed that on average, participants would prefer their former toys to be preserved in a collection instead of being handled roughly by small children. As a manipulation check, we conducted a pretest with a group of 83 attached and unattached sellers drawn from the same pool of participants used in the main experiment. Pretest participants rated the propriety of these two usage intentions on seven-point scales ranging from “very inappropriate” to “very appropriate.” The results of this pretest indicated that participants considered it more appropriate to sell their used toy to a toy collector than to a day care buyer (M = 5.82 vs. M = 4.87; F(1, 81) = 24.97, p < .001). Furthermore, this pattern of results was identical for respondents considering a toy to which they were strongly attached and for those considering a toy to which they were weakly attached (F(1, 81) = 1.04, n.s.).

After the usage intent manipulation, participants in the main experiment indicated, assuming equivalent offers, which buyer they would be more inclined to sell to—the toy collector or the day care buyer. Finally, we asked participants to estimate the current market value of every toy with which they had played. We included this measure of market value to rule out the possibility that toys to which participants were strongly attached were objectively more valuable than toys to which they were weakly attached.

Results

On average, participants identified 6.1 toys that they had owned or played with during their childhood, resulting in 714 observations. For these observations, we examined the correspondence between self-reported product attachment and the listing price participants provided for each toy.
(stated in terms of deviation from market value) before the introduction of usage intent. Consistent with prior research showing that stronger product attachment leads to higher asking prices than weaker attachment, we found a significant positive correlation between ratings of product attachment and listing prices (ρ = .56, p < .01). Furthermore, participants indicated they would list the toy to which they were most attached (according to their rankings) significantly higher than its market value (M = 13.3% above market value, p < .0001). Conversely, participants indicated they would list the toy to which they were least attached significantly lower than its market value (M = 8.5% below market value, p < .0001). These results suggest that when buyer usage intent is not salient, attached sellers are likely to inflate selling prices.

To verify that our manipulation of product attachment was successful, we compared self-reported attachment of participants in the strong- versus weak-attachment conditions with their most or least attached toy, respectively. As expected, participants in the strong-attachment condition were significantly more attached to the specific toy about which they were probed than participants in the weak-attachment condition (M = +13.3% vs. M = –8.5%; paired t(115) = 4.84, p < .0001).

Our main hypothesis was that buyer usage intentions influence choice of buyer for strongly attached sellers but not for weakly attached sellers. As a measure of sellers’ sensitivity to usage intent, we evaluated whether the choice shares of strongly versus weakly attached sellers deviated from chance. When considering toys to which they were strongly attached, 65% of participants chose to sell their toy to the professional toy collector rather than the day care buyer, a proportion that is significantly greater than chance (χ²(1) = 8.19, p < .01). In contrast, only 44% of participants in the weak-attachment condition chose to sell their toy to the toy collector, a proportion that does not differ from chance (χ²(1) = 1.42, n.s.). Furthermore, strongly attached sellers were more inclined to sell to the toy collector than weakly attached sellers (P_strong = 65% vs. P_weak = 44%; χ²(1) = 4.39, p < .04). This analysis suggests that for participants in the weak-attachment condition, buyer usage intent did not influence choice of buyer. However, participants in the strong-attachment condition were more likely to sell their toy to the buyer whose usage intent was deemed to be more appropriate (i.e., the toy collector).

Importantly, the judged market value (rather than the listing prices described previously) of the specific toy that participants considered did not differ for participants in the strong- versus weak-attachment groups (M_strong = $21 vs. M_weak = $16; t(115) = 1.42, n.s.). Together, the data on listing prices and market value suggest that although strongly and weakly attached participants saw no difference in the objective value of a toy, strongly attached participants were nevertheless likely to list it at a higher price than weakly attached participants.

Because participants estimated the market value for each toy they had selected, we had sufficient observations to perform a secondary analysis, in which we compared market value estimates for the same toy (e.g., set of building blocks) provided by participants in the strong-attachment versus weak-attachment conditions. After normalizing the data by item to adjust for item-level variance (some toys are more valuable than others), we determined that the average z-score of the high-attachment group (M = .27) was no different than the average z-score of the low-attachment group (M = .03, n.s.). Taken together, these results suggest that strong attachment to a product, not an increase in the product’s perceived market value, makes sellers more sensitive to the usage intentions communicated by potential buyers.

**Discussion**

Study 4 shows that even when estimates of an item’s market value do not differ, strongly attached sellers are more influenced by buyer usage intent than weakly attached sellers in their choice of a buyer. Specifically, when buyer usage intent is salient, strongly (vs. weakly) attached sellers are more willing to offer discounts to buyers whose usage intent is deemed proper but does not differ in their assessment of the item’s market value. This is consistent with our theorizing and suggests that the impact of attachment on sellers’ pricing decisions cannot be explained by an account related to the perceived market value of an item.

Furthermore, the results of Study 4 replicate the findings of prior research that when buyer usage intent is not salient, strongly attached sellers typically demand higher prices than weakly attached sellers. Nevertheless, the findings from this study also go beyond prior research by showing that when buyer usage intent is salient, this pattern can be reversed if the seller judges buyer usage intent to be appropriate.

Finally, Study 4 complements our previous findings by showing that the interaction between attachment and buyer usage intent affects not only consumers’ willingness to discount but also their choice between potential buyers. This can have important implications in secondary markets, in which buyers and sellers often interact and communicate before executing an exchange.

**General Discussion**

The purpose of this research is to provide a more nuanced view of how consumers’ emotional attachment to products influences their pricing decisions when selling used goods. Our argument that the minimum price sellers are willing to accept can be sensitive to buyer usage intent leads to a rather paradoxical prediction that increased attachment to a product can result in steeper discounts rather than higher markups. Indeed, our assertion is that by making sellers sensitive to buyer usage intentions, product attachment may overpower their reluctance to part with a product and even motivate them to provide discounts when the usage intent is deemed to be proper.

The results from four studies, including a field experiment, show that the minimum price sellers in secondary markets are willing to accept is influenced by a combination of product attachment and the way a buyer intends to use a product. In contrast to prior research, which suggests that attachment should increase the minimum price sellers are willing to accept for a used good, we identify cases in which strong attachment leads sellers to accept lower prices.
if a buyer’s usage intention is deemed to be appropriate. We attribute this effect to sellers’ increased sensitivity to buyer usage intent when they feel strong emotional attachment to a product. In our studies, we held the relationship between the buyer and seller constant and varied only the intended usage of the product, suggesting that the increased sensitivity to buyer usage intent stems from a seller’s lingering concern with a product’s fate and the desire to find it a good home.

Study 1 documents the impact of buyer usage intentions on the decisions of strongly attached sellers by showing that attached sellers are willing to sacrifice profit to sell to a buyer who expresses proper rather than improper usage intentions. Study 2 reveals an interaction between product attachment and buyer usage intent, showing that sellers’ reaction to buyer usage intent is a function of the self-reported intensity of their attachment to a product. Study 3 uses different segments of sellers (personal vs. professional) as a proxy for attachment and shows that the decisions of these segments in a real marketplace are differentially sensitive to buyer usage intent. Finally, Study 4 shows that product attachment is distinct from the objective value of an item and that the effect of product attachment on buyer usage intent occurs even for products of identical market value.

**Theoretical Contributions**

This research contributes to several different literatures. First, it enhances our understanding of product attachment by suggesting that in addition to creating in consumers an intensified reluctance to part with their possessions, strong feelings of attachment to a product also make consumers more sensitive to how buyers plan to use the product following a transaction. Consequently, in contrast to the prediction that attached consumers always demand a premium, we show that strongly attached sellers can be more likely than weakly attached sellers to offer discounted prices when a buyer’s intended use of a product is salient and judged to be appropriate. Thus, our theory provides a more nuanced picture of how product attachment influences sellers’ decisions by identifying sensitivity to buyer usage intent as a novel consequence of attachment that can actually reverse the traditional effect of attachment on the minimum price that sellers are willing to accept. Whereas our research shows that expectations about buyer usage can influence the prices sellers are willing to accept, it would also be worthwhile to examine whether the former owner of a product experiences changes in post-transactional satisfaction or product valuation upon learning how a buyer has actually used the product. Further research could also explore whether different types or styles of product attachment (Kogut and Kogut 2011) have distinct effects on sellers’ decisions.

Second, we contribute to the extensive body of prior work on differentiation by examining competition among buyers rather than competition among sellers. In particular, we challenge the prevailing assumption that buyers in secondary markets compete for scarce resources exclusively on the basis of price—that is, the notion that high bids win (Monroe and Della Bitta 1978; Oxenfeldt 1973; Riley and Zeckhauser 1983). Instead, we propose that buyers may differentiate themselves from higher bidders by explicitly communicating how they intend to use a product. The idea that buyer usage intent can be a source of nonprice competition among buyers complements the well-established notion that sellers (of new or used goods) can compete with lower-priced competitors by differentiating themselves along nonprice dimensions such as location (D’Aspremont, Gabszewicz, and Thisse 1979; De Palma et al. 1985; Hotelling 1929), brand (Keller 1993; Simon and Sullivan 1993; Sujan and Bettman 1989), and service (Levitt 1980; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985). Furthermore, the identification of buyer usage intent as an important element of buyer differentiation paves the way for further research to investigate additional nonprice dimensions along which buyers may successfully compete for scarce goods in secondary markets. Researchers interested in negotiations may take a particular interest in identifying other strategic nonmonetary bargaining chips that buyers can use when negotiating prices. Further research could also investigate how varying the credibility of the usage intention expressed by a potential buyer affects the price sellers are willing to accept.

Third, our results contribute to the literature on product disposal. Related research shows that variation in the intensity of product attachment moderates the decision to retain versus dispose of a used product (Belk 1991). We extend this work by showing that when consumers have made the decision to sell, the intensity of product attachment can influence their sensitivity to buyer usage intent and can ultimately affect the minimum price they are willing to accept. In addition, our results reveal a shared feature of two distinct disposal methods: selling and donating. Unlike donors, sellers are typically concerned with profit maximization. Nevertheless, we find that sellers of used goods resemble donors in that they care about how a product is used after it leaves their possession, albeit for a potentially different reason. In contrast to prior research suggesting that donors are concerned with how a gift is used by its recipient because the usage may signal the recipient’s regard for the relationship (Sherry 1983), we show that concern with a product’s fate may stem from attachment rather than signaling power. This is particularly clear in the context of a secondary market, in which used goods are often exchanged in onetime transactions with relatively anonymous buyers rather than between family and friends.

Fourth, our results relate to the literature on fairness. In particular, our results suggest that people not only are concerned about equitable marketplace exchanges in the sense that all people are treated fairly (Hoffman, McCabe, and Smith 1996; Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1986; Xia, Monroe, and Cox 2004) but also are concerned that even the products exchanged are treated fairly. Just as people are willing to forgo personal gain in pursuit of fairness by punishing self-serving actors in the ultimatum game (Nowak, Page, and Sigmund 2000), we show that attached sellers may punish buyers who plan to use a product in a manner the sellers deem inappropriate by refusing to grant them discounts and even charging buyers premiums. Conversely, attached sellers may reward buyers whose usage intent is perceived as appropriate by accepting a lower price. These
results provide a new view of how people put the fates of other people (or products, in this case) ahead of their own personal well-being (e.g., by sacrificing profit to find products a good home).

**Implications**

In addition to its theoretical contributions, this research suggests several managerial and policy implications. First, we suggest a new approach for organizations that seek to accelerate new product purchases by buying or collecting used products from consumers. Specifically, we suggest that rather than using financial incentives to encourage product upgrade, trade-in, or replacement, organizations could instead communicate their intention to use or dispose of products in a manner that is consistent with consumer preferences. Organizations that fail to consider this alternative approach are likely to discourage strongly attached consumers from trading in their used products. For example, the U.S. government recently sponsored a “Cash for Clunkers” program that offered a credit of up to $4,500 to consumers who were willing to trade in old cars for more fuel-efficient vehicles. The official website of the program explicitly communicated the post-transactional usage of the trade-in vehicle, noting “the program requires the scrapping of your eligible trade-in vehicle,” and more specifically, that “the CARS trade-in vehicle will be crushed or shredded onsite within 180 days” (www.cars.gov). It is possible that strongly attached car owners were deterred from participating in the program by this statement of how the vehicle would be used following the transaction. Our research suggests that to encourage participation in a similar program, policy makers should consider ways to communicate usage intent in a way that is likely to be more appealing to consumers who may feel strong emotional attachment to their used products.

Another marketing implication stemming from this research provides guidance to individual decision makers and marketing practitioners who operate in secondary markets in which buyer-seller interactions play an important role. In particular, we propose that buyers may be able to procure products from strongly attached sellers at a lower cost by simply communicating an appropriate usage intent. The identification of this strategic advantage for buyers not only contributes to a more comprehensive view of seller behavior but can also facilitate negotiations in secondary market transactions. Real estate provides an illustration of how such a strategy could be applied: Home buyers who communicate to sellers their plans to preserve the décor of a house may obtain real estate at a lower price than buyers who merely make an offer or those who express plans to remodel. Similarly, antique dealers may be able to obtain discounts from strongly attached sellers by communicating their intention to restore antique items to their original condition. Managers who act as agents (e.g., real estate agents) may increase the attractiveness of their value proposition by highlighting to potential clients the risk of losing profit when they discount items to which they feel attached. Furthermore, although the studies reported in this article focus primarily on transactions involving the sale of consumer goods, our findings have implications for non-consumer goods as well. For example, in a corporate acquisition, the board of the target company may be more willing to accept a bid from a buyer who intends to structure the company in a way that aligns with the board’s preferences.

A third implication of this research relates to sellers who feel strong emotional attachment to their products. In particular, our findings suggest that to maximize profits, strongly attached sellers should attempt to offset the effect of product attachment on their selling decisions. For example, they may wish to use an intermediary who is emotionally detached from the product (e.g., a real estate agent) to execute transactions on their behalf. Study 3 provides evidence of the potential benefits of such a strategy, in which relatively detached professional car dealers were less influenced by buyer usage intent than individual owners selling their own vehicle. Another possible method of offsetting product attachment during the selling process is to focus on a product’s utilitarian functions. Indeed, prior literature supports the notion that consumers are more strongly attached to (and thus more reluctant to part with) hedonic than to utilitarian products (Ariely, Huber, and Wertenbroch 2005; Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000). Further research may confirm whether focusing on an item’s hedonic rather than utilitarian aspects can reduce strongly attached sellers’ sensitivity to buyer usage intent.

In conclusion, this research enhances understanding of the price that sellers are willing to accept in secondary markets, which is often an important consideration for consumers disposing of used goods. Despite its critical role in consumer behavior, product disposal has been largely neglected by consumer research, which has focused instead on factors relating to product acquisition and usage (for exceptions, see Bayus 1991; Cripps and Meyer 1994; Okada 2001, 2006). Over the past four decades, many academicians have issued calls for more extensive research in the area of product disposal (Hanson 1980; Harrell and McConocha 1992; Holbrook 1987; Jacoby 1978; Jacoby, Berning, and Dietvorst 1977). We hope that our research will rekindle the field’s interest in consumer disposal behavior, thereby prompting further work in this important domain.

**REFERENCES**


