

**Emergence of Individual Psychological Ownership
through Emotions – An Empirical Analysis in the
Entertainment Industry**

Abstract

The global increase of digital technologies and the digitization of services are meeting new customer needs. This raises the question of whether consumers' perceptions are changing as their relationship with technology evolves, and what the implications are for the purchase and use of digital goods. Another question is how the increasing dematerialization of objects, especially in the form of digital technologies, fosters a sense of ownership. The study examines the emergence of individual psychological ownership (i-PO) for digital/material objects in the entertainment industry and the impact of emotions through 13 interviews. The results confirm that positive emotions trigger i-PO and promote its emergence; negative emotions weaken this effect and influence customer relationships. This study provides guidance for companies to improve relationship marketing.

Keywords: psychological ownership, emotional prerequisites, consumer behavior, relationship marketing

1. Introduction

As the pace of development and global adoption of digital, interactive, and connected technologies, such as virtual reality (VR), AI, and social media, continues to accelerate, the way we interact with them in many areas of life is becoming increasingly important, in addition to the level of engagement (Belk, 2013; Kirk et al., 2015; Micu & Ashley, 2022). Furthermore, **technological innovations are creating novel products and services** as well as new markets to meet future customer needs (Morewedge et al., 2021; Tseng, 2021). Accordingly, digital technologies have the potential to fundamentally and sustainably change consumer behavior and interactions with products (Belk, 2013; Morewedge et al., 2021; Luangrath et al., 2022).

The **increasing digitization** of services raises the question of whether consumers' perceptions are being transformed by a changed relationship with technology, which would have significant consequences for the purchase and use of digital goods (Kirk et al., 2015; Morewedge et al., 2021). Consequently, it is questionable how the sense and desire of ownership should be promoted in consumers in the face of the increasing dematerialization of target objects, especially in the form of digital technologies (Baxter & Aurisicchio, 2018; Kirk & Swain, 2018; Peck & Luangrath, 2018). The consumer's subjective sense that a tangible or intangible good is "theirs" is referred to as **psychological ownership** (PO) and causes significant positive and negative behavioral, emotional and psychological consequences, such as responsibility, care, and personal sacrifice for the target object, as well as frustration or stress (Pierce et al., 2001; 2003; Pierce & Peck, 2018). The construct of PO can arise at the individual level of the person (i-PO) and as collective psychological ownership (c-PO) (Pierce & Jussila, 2010). Based on current knowledge, i-PO can contribute significantly to understanding consumer attitudes, motivations, and behaviors, such as purchase decision and

customer satisfactions, which is why the theory of i-PO has generated considerable interest in marketing research (Jussila et al., 2015; Kirk et al., 2018; Luangrath et al., 2022).

2. Psychological Ownership, its Emergence and Influential Factors

I-PO emerges through the combination of three factors – the roots, routes and prerequisites – interacting repeatedly and steady together (Figure 1). Activating the roots can also stimulate the routes as a direct generating mechanism of i-PO, so that the cognitive-affective state unfolds, which is associated with consequences for the attitudes, the experience and the behavior of the individual (Pierce et al., 2001; Pierce & Jussila, 2011).

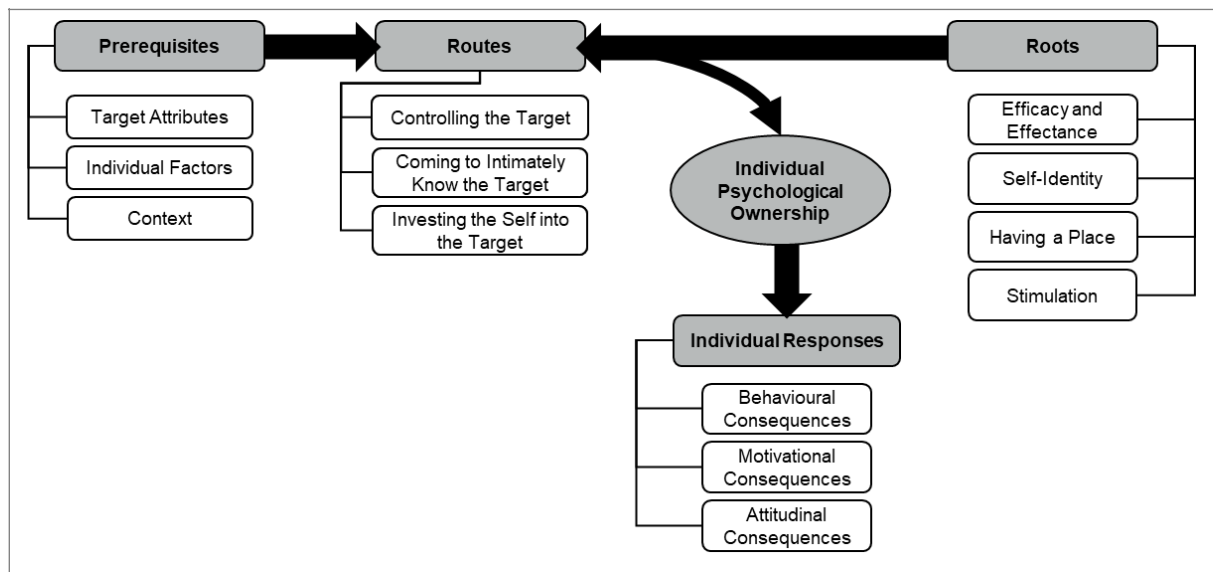


Figure 1: Theory of the genesis and consequences of i-PO (following Jussila et al., 2015; Schübel, 2016; Beisiegel, 2019; Ruckau, 2021)

The **roots** explain in the sense of basal motives why humans establish relationships with objects in the first place (Pierce et al., 2001, 2003; Pierce & Jussila, 2011). Accordingly, the cause for the development of i-PO lies in different needs (Figure 2), which are satisfied by experiencing ownership. Each motive favors complementary and additive to each other the emergence of i-PO, so that already the activation of one function is sufficient for the emergence of feelings of well-being (Pierce et al., 2001).

Efficacy and effectance	The desire to feel causal efficacy, influence and control in discovering and changing one's environment.
Self-identity	The three functions of property: to define oneself in terms of one's individuality and distinctiveness, to express this self-identity to others, and to maintain continuity of self.
Having a place	The psychological attachment to a perceived home, which with the help of familiarity, comfort, and security provides an anchoring of the self in the world.

Stimulation	The need for arousal, activation and a positive affective experience by means of the perception and use of an object.
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Figure 2: Roots of i-PO (following Pierce & Jussila, 2011, pp. 47)

Similar to the functioning of the roots, each of the **routes** alone can establish the psychological attachment to an object, whereas the combination of multiple routes more quickly evokes a more intense sense of i-PO and explain how it directly emerges (Pierce et al., 2001, 2003; Pierce & Jussila, 2011): ‘Controlling the target’, e.g., with the help of the ability to influence, use, and consume the object, directly promotes the development of i-PO. ‘Coming to intimately know the target’ encompasses the knowledge of the target object, which the individual gathers through ongoing interaction and leads to the profound knowledge and familiarity with the object, which can also result in feelings of ownership. ‘Investing the self into the target’, e.g., in the form of time, skills, ideas, and physical cognitive energy increases i-PO toward a target object.

Although the state of i-PO is latent in every person, it does not necessarily occur, but is additionally influenced by complex interrelations of individual, object-related, and situational antecedents in the sense of **prerequisites** (Pierce et al., 2003). Consequently, certain attributes of the target object (target attributes), the character of the individual (individual factors), and the context determine the development potential and the manifestation of i-PO by indirectly promoting or hindering its development (ibid.).

Digital technologies partially replace material equivalents, or no longer have a physical counterpart, but are fundamentally different from material objects, such as software applications (Belk 2013; Morewedge et al., 2021). Due to the immaterial impermanent, and easily replicable nature of digital goods, the genesis of i-PO seems to be more difficult as well as the experience of the cognitive-affective state less intense than with physical objects, which is attributed especially to the lack of physical contact and the limited control over the digital target object (Atasoy & Morewedge, 2018; Catapano et al., 2022). Especially the routes controlling the target and investing the self into the target as well as the roots self-identity and efficacy and effectance are key for the genesis of i-PO towards digital goods (Lee & Suh, 2015; Kumar, 2022). Some inherent features of digital objects seem to be particularly valued compared to physical products, such as the convenience and ease of use, the possibility of creating a virtual identity, the facilitation of global networking, and the low storage and maintenance requirements of the digital good (Belk 2013, 2014; Catapano et al., 2022). This can be explained by the effect of the individual’s generation on their attitudes towards digital objects, which in turn influences the potential for the genesis of i-PO for digital goods (Belk, 2013; Morewedge et al., 2021).

Several studies emphasize, especially in the digital environment, the **significance of the age** of the individual in the genesis of i-PO (Kirk & Swain, 2018; Olckers & Booyesen, 2021). Individuals born from 1980 onwards are particularly influenced by numerous technologies during their childhood and adolescence, as new digital devices and technical possibilities, for the first time, are an integral part of human life (Kescharwani 2020; Nevin & Schieman 2021). Referring to the strikingly divergent socialization and characteristic competencies of individuals born after 1980, Prensky (2001a; 2001b) introduces the term digital native. In

contrast, people born before the digital age, before 1980, are referred to as digital immigrants because they only came into contact with the new technologies in adulthood and have to learn how to use them (Prensky, 2001a).

Emotions have an elementary role in the genesis of i-PO and are the inherent affective component of i-PO, as the perception of possessive feelings is supposed to provide pleasure (Pierce & Jussila, 2011; Pierce & Peck, 2018). First, emotions are the inherent affective component of i-PO, in addition to the cognitive component, since the perception of feelings of ownership is supposed to provide pleasure per se (Pierce & Jussila, 2011, p. 16). Second, the sensation of i-PO triggers further emotions as one of the three possible types of consequences of the cognitive-affective state (Pierce et al., 2003, p. 102). In addition, the root ‘stimulation’ is theorized to be an emotional motivator of i-PO accompanied by positive affect (Jussila & Tuominen, 2010; Pierce & Jussila 2011). Thus, emotion appears to be fundamentally a function, element, and consequence of i-PO. However, further research is needed to understand which emotions are associated with the experience of ownership and in what ways (Peck & Luangrath 2018, p. 244). For example, Kirk et al. (2015) conceptualize a multifaceted relationship between pride and i-PO. Baer and Brown (2012) also illustrate the relationship between negative affect and i-PO, if proposed changes that would reduce intangible psychological property cause a sense of personal loss and negative emotions, like anger and frustration.

Based on these findings, different emotions can currently be classified at different points in the i-PO concept. However, for the following qualitative analysis, the present work is limited to the role of emotions as an individual influencing factor on the i-PO formation process, in order to respond to the research call for the identification of emotions relevant to the formation of i-PO (Peck & Luangrath, 2018).

3. Methodology

Given the disagreement in academia about the exact process of i-PO’s as well as the need for research on viewing the construct from a marketing perspective (Pierce & Jussila, 2011; Jussila et al., 2015; Morewedge et al., 2021), the exploratory empirical study focuses on the individual experience of consumers in the development of the cognitive affective state. Especially the role of emotions in the genesis of i-PO and generational differences are examined in the context of the digitization of goods in the entertainment industry (Figure 3).

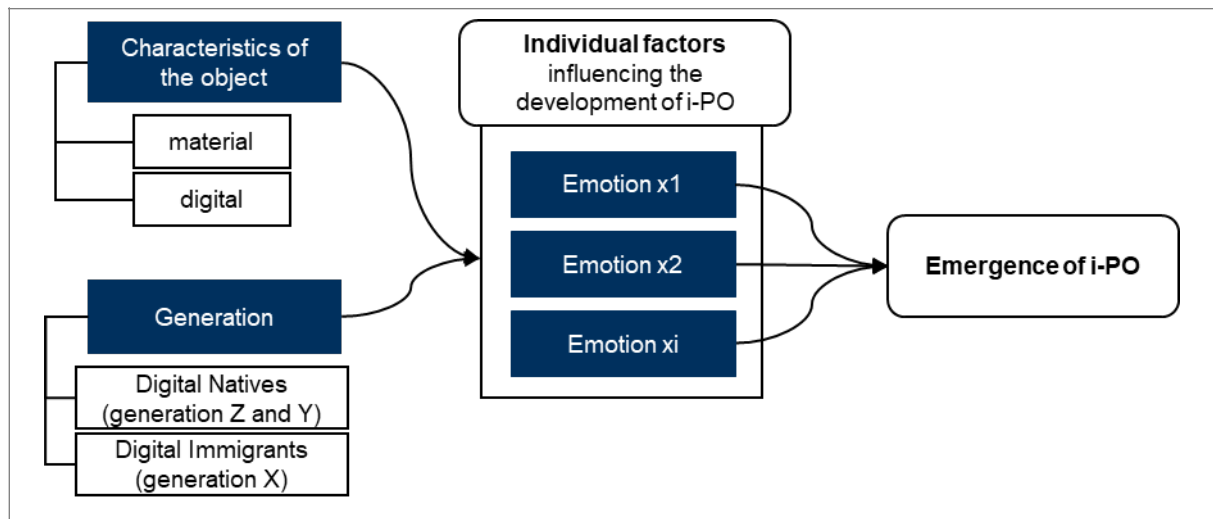


Figure 3: Research model of the qualitative study

To explore attitudes and experiences related to the research object, a qualitative approach using partially standardized individual interviews was employed, allowing interviewees to express their implicit views, while at the same time ensuring the thematic relevance and comparability of the conversations (Mayring, 2016; Misoch, 2019). The study, conducted with a German sample, involved 13 interviews with consumers of digital and material entertainment products during November 16th to December 4th, 2022, with interview durations ranging from 30 to 73 minutes.

After conducting interviews, recorded material undergoes rule-guided transcription to create transcripts for qualitative data analysis. Following research objectives, existing literature on i-PO, raw data, and available resources, Mayring's qualitative content analysis is employed for systematic categorization (Mayring, 2016, 2022). Interpretations are grounded in empirical evidence, using inductive coding, direct quotations, and referencing current i-PO literature for comprehensibility, consistency, and openness to new hypotheses (Kuckartz, 2014; Mayring, 2016).

4. Results, Discussion and Implications

With regard to the central objective of the study, the results indicate the relevance of three groups of emotions as individual influencing factors in the genesis of consumers' i-PO (Figure 4). First, **positive emotions** presumably promote the formation of i-PO by being able to stimulate both roots and routes. Thereby, the different positive emotions probably support the formation process of i-PO to different extents, e.g., by being able to satisfy only single movies or by activating all roots and routes. In addition, six positive emotions appear to be directly linked to fully unfolded i-PO, supporting the assumption of a positive affect inherent to the experience of property (Pierce et al., 2003; Pierce & Jussila 2011; Pierce & Peck 2018).

In addition, it is striking that the two positive emotions most commonly associated with i-PO, love and joy, stimulate each root and route, reinforcing the theorized additive and complementary effects between the components of i-PO's emergence process (Pierce et al., 2001, 2003; Pierce & Jussila, 2011). Consistent with the current research on the relation of emotions and consumer i-PO, the importance of certain positive emotions, such as

satisfaction, joy and pride, has been shown in both the emergence and experience and consequences of i-PO (Jussila et al., 2015; Kirk et al., 2015).

Contrary to this, the ten identified **negative emotions** are mainly stated in the context of the perceived disruptive factors of the entertainment industry’s services as well as in the description of the development of the interview partners’ usage behavior. For the most part, the subjects are dissatisfied with the digital or material target object, which usually leads to a decline in consumption to the point of persistent abandonment of the entertainment product and favors the use of the material or digital equivalent. As a consequence, negative emotions primarily inhibit the formation of i-PO, as only isolated connections with the roots and routes occur, which are largely due to the conscious rejection of the product or the purpose of avoiding the negative affect with the help of the target object.

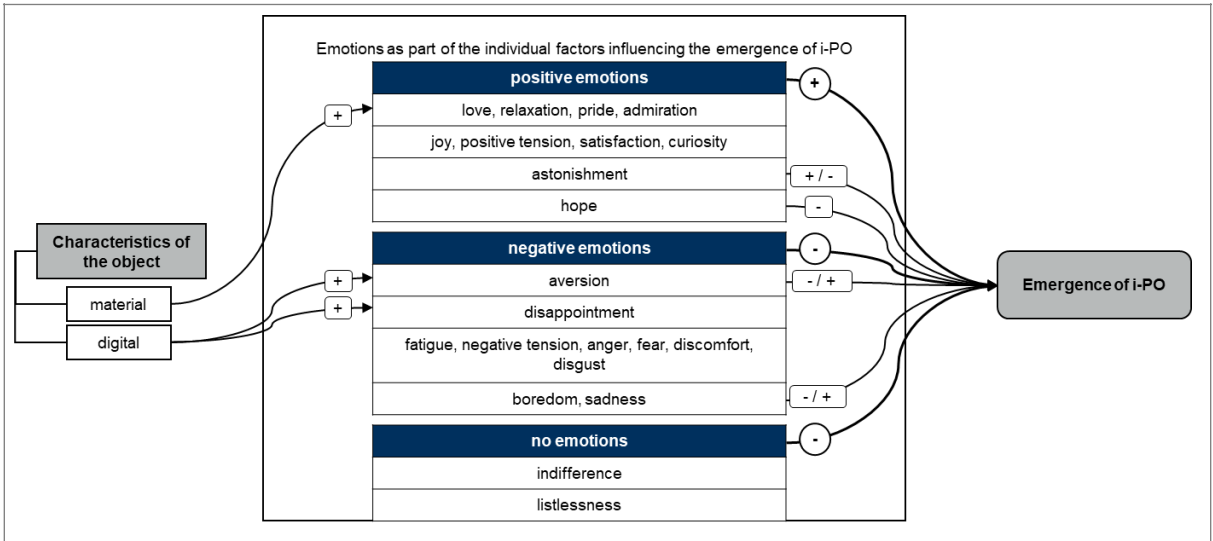


Figure 4: Assumptions about the effects of emotions on the genesis of i-PO based on the qualitative data

In the majority of the interviews there are explicit references to the absence of affect, which is why the main category ‘no emotions’ with two included subcategories is part of the category system. The lack of affect has a comparable effect on the emergence of feelings of possession as in the case of negative emotions, since disinterest in entertainment products has a rather suppressive effect on the genesis of i-PO. The participants look for substitutes to the target object that correspond more to their preferences and needs for stimulation and entertainment.

The ten most frequently expressed positive emotions, in descending order are shown in Figure 5. The subcategory love, which is coded most frequently in the main category of positive emotions, verbalizes the respondents’ emotional attachment to the material or digital entertainment product, which manifests itself, among other things, in the form of a pronounced appreciation of and familiarity with the object. Due to the perception of the beloved object as better and more beautiful as possible substitutes, the separation from the product as well as the use of the material or digital equivalent is categorically rejected. The emotion love seems to be connected with all roots of i-PO, because besides the motive’s stimulation and efficacy and effectance, which are usually connected with positive emotions, also self-identity and having a place are satisfied, because the object is assessed as extremely

significant and comfortable for the own person. In addition, the product usually serves as an emotional link between the present between the present self and past experiences, which is why the individual regards it as part of his or her identity.

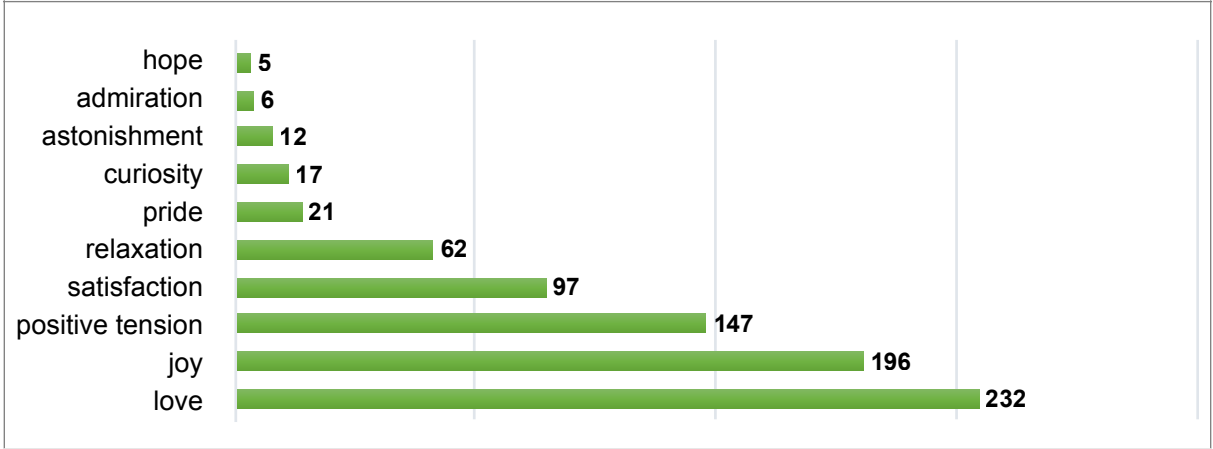


Figure 5: Number of codings of the subcategories of positive emotions

The ten coded subcategories of negative emotions in descending order are shown in Figure 6. The subcategory most frequently coded here is aversion in the sense of conscious, emotional rejection of the digital or material entertainment product. This can have a variety of causes, such as incompatibility with the interests of the individual or an insufficient degree of personalization of the product. As a result, the subject perceives the object as contradictory to his or her ego, resulting in the firm rejection of the product, sometimes without ever having used it. The dislike occurs on the majority together with other negative emotions, which leads to the omitted consumption or purchase of the product, as it is seen as pointless. Especially the lack of intended stimulation and efficacy and effectance, in combination with the lack of control over the object prevent the development of an emotional attachment.

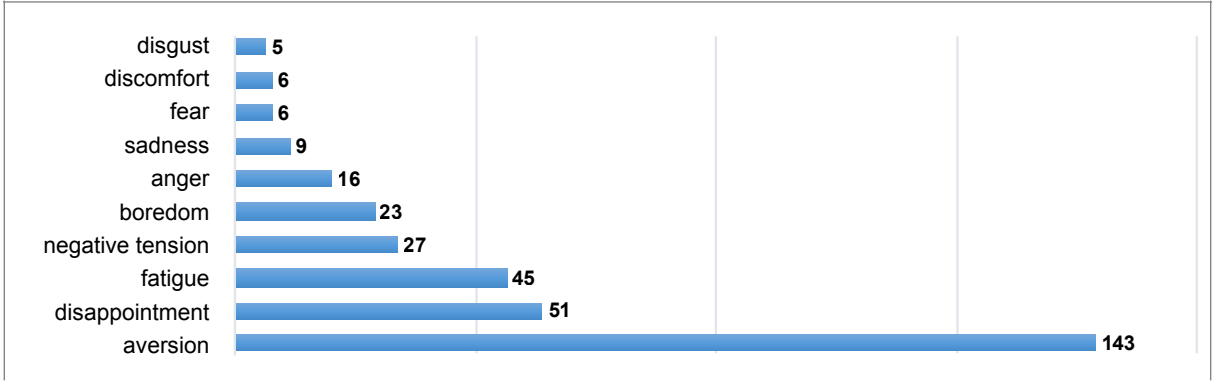


Figure 6: Number of codings of the subcategories of negative emotions

Specifically, the **generation of participants** in the sense of digital natives vs. digital immigrants does not appear to have any effect on the development of i-PO including the associated emotions. Thus, Helsper and Eynon (2010) can be agreed that the generation of the individual is probably not the decisive factor for their attitudes and dealings with digital vs. material objects. In sum, the digital or material entertainment products evoke positive

emotions in the majority of respondents, which in turn promote the genesis of i-PO. This result can be attributed primarily to the individual, targeted purpose of use and the freedom of choice when using the products, in that objects that trigger negative or no affect are avoided by consumers.

With regard to **practical implications** for the marketing of digital entertainment products, these should be brought into line with the positive experience of material equivalents by generally making them more vivid, and realistic. The visual appearance of digital goods in particular trigger dissatisfaction and negative affect in the test subjects, so that more attention could be paid to design, especially haptic aspects, in future product development. To activate the controlling the target and investing the self into the target routes, the digital products should be adapted in a way that, the individual scope for design and the feeling of physical control over the immaterial object are increased. For example, the digital library of an e-book reader may be designed in the form of a real bookshelf to help users become more quickly familiar with the new, virtual product format. Following the research on i-PO, virtual images, GIFs, and VR that suggest physical proximity and touching of the intangible product are probably equally suitable for a more intense and emotional consumption experience, which in turn increases psychological attachment to the digital object (Peck & Shu, 2009; Carrozzi et al., 2019; Luangrath et al. 2022).

5. Conclusions, Limitations, Future Research

The qualitative study suggests that three types of emotions impact consumers' development of i-PO toward digital or tangible entertainment products. Positive emotions presumably activate both roots and routes to varying degrees and are directly linked to the full experience of ownership, suggesting a positive effect on the genesis of i-PO, while negative emotions and the absence of affect hinder them. Each emotion likely influences consumers' perceptions and actions, potentially reinforcing each other. Surprisingly, the study does not find generational differences in i-PO genesis and associated emotions.

The assumed importance of emotions as a component of the individual influencing factors and the fully developed cognitive-affective state is reaffirmed. Moreover, the significant effects of consumers' i-PO on their attitudes, experiences, and behaviors toward the digital or tangible objects underscore the relevance of the concept for branding (Jussila et al., 2015; Morewedge et al., 2021).

Several limitations exist in this study. First, it can only propose theory-building hypotheses regarding the connections between emotions and i-PO in consumers, including generational and digital vs. material format effects. Quantitative studies are needed for empirical confirmation. Second, there's difficulty in precisely defining emotions, given their multidimensional nature and individual variations. Additionally, emotions' subjectivity and unconscious elements make it challenging to retrospectively analyze and articulate respondents' feelings. The study's focus on entertainment products may impact generalizability, warranting exploration in other industries. Furthermore, the vague definitions of age cohorts and digital natives/immigrants reduce the significance of the finding that generational factors don't influence i-PO development.

Finally, it remains to be emphasized that the numerous interactions between the emotions and elements of the genesis of i-PO should be investigated more closely in order to be able to understand the exact development process of the experience of ownership among consumers and to include it in the design of the customer relationship.

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