

Theorizing Objects as Communicative Actors in Objectum-Sexual Relationships

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Abstract

We live in a world designed by intention. Buildings, bridges, transportation, smartphones, laptops, and other objects surround us ubiquitously. Consequently, a lot of thought is given to the planning, designing, and construction of these structures and systems. Some objects for some individuals, however, hold value exceeding beyond just their function. For a particular community of individuals, certain objects even become objects of affection and intimacy. "Objectum-sexuals," defined as individuals who are sexually attracted and oriented to love objects, find gratification and intimate satisfaction in objects. This paper attempts to unravel the ways in which objects establish a social status in the lives of four objectum-sexual individuals. Two dimensions were identified that elevate objects as more than just functional entities in objectum-sexual relationships. The first dimension identified objects with physical and abstract personalities imparting them with a uniqueness. Objects were also seen as bodies with consciousness, having a soul or a spirit as reported by the objectum-sexual participants. The two dimensions of personality and consciousness elevated the objects' presence in the relationship beyond just a functional body used to conduct a certain task. The treatment extended by the objectum-sexual participants towards the object is that of a "thou" rather than an "it."

Keywords: objectum-sexuality, object relationship, human-object communication

Introduction

The human race has far left behind the time when navigating through forests and living by the rivers was a part of everyday life. Today, we live in a world designed by intention. Buildings, bridges, transportation, smartphones, laptops, and other objects surround us ubiquitously. Consequently, a lot of thought is given to the planning, designing, and construction of these structures and systems. Once operational, the use value of these objects supersedes all other roles that they play in the functioning of human lives at large.

Some objects for some individuals, however, hold value exceeding beyond just their function. Sentimental attachment to material objects is not unheard of (Tian & Belk, 2005). At times this attachment is because the object is a gift from someone special (Kim, Kankanhalli, & Lee, 2018), at times it is because of the longevity for which the object has been with someone (Keong & Jessica, 2019), and at times because of the dependence on the object for routine works (Konok, Gigler, Bereczky, & Miklósi, 2016). For a particular community of individuals, certain objects even become objects of affection and intimacy. "Objectum-sexuals," defined as individuals who are sexually attracted and oriented to love objects, find gratification and intimate satisfaction in objects. The orientation to love objects romantically is called objectum sexuality. Uninterested in intimacy with human beings, objectum sexual (OS) individuals find

relationships with objects gratifying and meaningful. It is an orientation just like homosexuality and heterosexuality with the presence of an object or objects instead of a human partner. Emotions and deep connections with the object of love is the prime distinguishing factor between objectum sexuality and otherwise considered abnormal sexual desires termed 'paraphilia'. It is important to mention here that these relationships are not manifestations of a fetish, but one where individuals see objects as romantic partners (Terry, 2010).

Eija-Riitta coined the term 'Objectum Sexuality' (Marsh, 2010) in the early 1970s and later went on to marry the Berlin wall in the year 1979, garnering media attention towards this queer sexual orientation. She even changed her name to Eija-Riitta Eklöf Berliner-Mauer where her surname meant the Berlin Wall in the German language. Like Eija-Riitta, there have been other objectum-sexuals who have been open about their sexual orientation towards objects. Popular among them are Erika Eiffel who married the Eiffel tower in 2007 (Musser, 2013). The "Objectum-sexuality International" website has been a major platform for people who identify as objectum-sexuals to connect with one another. The website also plays a crucial role in disseminating information about this queer sexuality. Past studies have limited analyses based on the information available from the website. For instance, based on a rhetorical criticism of the website, Cole (2013) stated that "members of the OSI community construct a worldview in which objects become living beings with souls capable of receiving and reciprocating love, desire and communication." However, first-hand experiences of OS individuals were not a part of the analysis done by the researcher. Similar commentary has been provided by Terry (2010) in her essay *Loving Objects*. These studies have helped generate conversations around objectum sexuality and also helped reduce the stigma and taboo attached to relationships between humans and objects. The taboo is primarily resultant from media reports on objectum sexuality that are often sensationalized without any intellectual inquiry of the phenomenon (Alleyne, 2008; Morrissey, 2009; Verma, 2017).

This paper attempts to unravel the ways in which objects establish a social status in the lives of four objectum sexual individuals. Particularly focusing on the communicative relationship between the human and the object of affection, the paper aims to theorize material objects for the discipline of communication. Semi-structured interviews with four objectum-sexual individuals were conducted to understand the way objects were conceptualized by the OS individuals in their romantic relationships.

Communicating with Objects

Due for a long time now, "objects" sought their way in a communication theory textbook as interactive actors for the first time in Littlejohn, Foss and Oetzel's, *Theories of Human Communication* (2016). They incorporated a "Beyond Human Communication" chapter in the eleventh edition of their highly recognized upper-division and graduate communication theory textbook. The four sub-areas under this chapter include; 1) human and nature communication, 2) human and object communication, 3) human and technology communication, and 4) human and divine communication. This addition comes after over forty years of the book's first edition which was published in 1976 when it enjoyed the status of being one of the few communication theory textbooks.

The identification of a possibility of communication between humans and non-humans initially seems surprising and challenging given the difference in the consciousness levels of the varied entities including humans, plants, animals, objects, artificial intelligence, and so on. However, one cannot overlook the fact that all communication, including communication between humans, is about managing an element of "otherness" (Peters, 1999). Otherness has been identified as inherent to any communication act and can be realized in various forms.

Between humans, it is identified in terms of race, gender, age, language and other parameters, whereas between human beings and non-humans, otherness is seen primarily in terms of species, and the level of consciousness. As stated by Gordon (2009), for successful communication to take place, one has to strive to “be the other person.” Acknowledging the limitation of it being impossible to transcend the self and be the other, the best one can do to successfully communicate is try and be as close to the other as possible.

Recognizing otherness in non-humans opens a new horizon to expand communication inquiry. “We become open to exploring our communication with other creatures and with the non-human; from animals to extraterrestrials to angels to computers to technologies to objects” (Littlejohn et al., 2016). Traditional models of communication comprising of communicators, a channel of communication, and messages shared between the communicating parties prove to be insufficient to explain any of the beyond human communication areas. Particularly for human-object communication, the conversation defies conventional communication conceptions where the sender and receiver both are living, animate, and capable of generating a response in the communication act. Even with these limitation, objectum-sexual individuals still manage to have a romantic relationship with objects. As stated on their official website;

Communication comes in many forms besides verbal. Many communicate with the object via sensations. However, this does not imply that we can converse with all objects. People communicate better with some people, and less or none with others, just as we do with objects. Even so, that does not stop some objectum-sexuals from talking aloud to objects as a basic means to communicate for a person.

With no ability to respond to messages from humans in the format of language most widely used to communicate, it was fascinating to understand the perspective of objectum-sexual participants in conceptualizing objects for their romantic relationships.

Methodology

In order to understand the role of the object for objectum sexual individuals, contact was initiated over the official OSI website. The probability of receiving a positive response was high given the OS community’s openness to learning about their orientation and its various aspects which is reflected in the following note on their website: “If you are a Doctor, Therapist, or Psychologist seeking research, we would be delighted to involve professional people in fields that will better help us comprehend and recognize our orientation to love objects” (OSI, 2015). Communication was initiated over email with the OS individual managing the website and considerable time was spent developing a rapport in order to assure complete transparency and no misinformation on behalf of the researcher. A snowball sampling technique was employed through this point of contact, in order to gain access to other members of the OS community. This technique of snowballing is particularly useful when access to participants with particular experiences crucial to the study is difficult like in the case of OS individuals (Etikan, Alkassim, & Abubakar, 2015). Snowball sampling also known as chain-referral sampling is initiated with having on board a participant recruited using convenience sampling method who is metaphorically the “seed” initiating the recruitment of other participants with similar experiences. Seen as a drawback by Erickson (1979), snowball sampling generates a biased sample as participants with better social connections get other participants who are similar to them. However, in the case of the present study, each participant was a link to the next in the OS community. Except for the one thing common that is their liking for the objects of their desire, the identified OS participants lived very different lives. As people who have lived with a romantic commitment to objects, the four identified participants from the objectum

sexual community can be considered to be qualified enough to be termed “excellent participants” for the objective of understanding object conceptualization in objectum sexual relationships.

The method used in this study was semi-structured qualitative interviewing, conducted online. Regular conversation exchange took place over platforms like Facebook Messenger and email for over a year. Member checks were also conducted over these platforms intermittently wherein the understanding of the phenomenon by the researcher was verified for being as close to what the participants meant in the interviews. Since the researcher does not identify as an objectum-sexual, conducting member checks was crucial. The experiences of being in love with an object, getting intimate with objects, and communicating with objects in a romantic sense are typical of an OS relationship and any assumptions on behalf of the researcher were to be consciously avoided.

With a dearth of concepts and explanations in place, a grounded theory approach was adopted to analyze the interview transcripts. Grounded theory is a qualitative methodology which was introduced by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) in the book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. As suggested by them, grounded theory helps researchers come up with new theoretical explanations for concepts and phenomena that cannot be completely explained by already existing theories.

The interviews conducted with the participants were transcribed for the purpose of grounded theory analysis. The transcribed text was read a number of times before the actual process of coding was initiated. It was filtered to relevant content limited only to the participants’ experiences with their objects. Having filtered through the gathered data for what was relevant, individual sentences were identified as units of analysis for the purpose of coding. As suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990) the questions, “What is this about? What is referenced here?” were at the center of inquiry while open coding each sentence. Sentences were open coded using *in vivo* codes as well as theoretical codes without going back to check for what words were used for coding sentences preceding the one being coded. Following the procedure suggested by Charmaz (2014), the open coding procedure was followed by axial coding thereby ascending the verbatim data from the interviews to higher levels of abstraction. The process involved an oscillation between inductive and deductive logic of comparing and questioning the codes to check for similarities and differences.

Analysis

Based on the importance and active presence of the object in the lives of the OS individuals, two dimensions were identified to conceptualize the object as more than just a functional entity in the relationship. For the OS participants, physical characteristics and features of the objects of their desire played a crucial role in building a personality of the object. Attributes like the shape of the object, its colour, materials used in its construction, the smell associated with it, all combined together, engendered a persona which made the object stand out as unique from other objects of a similar nature. The engendering of an object personality from its physical appearance is not very dissimilar from how individuals evaluate personalities of other humans based on physical appearances. The hair, its colour and style, facial features, beardedness, presence or absence of glasses, height and other characteristics have a strong impact on a person’s personality as seen by others (Borkenau & Liebler, 1993). It is the personality of an individual that is their first differentiating factor from other people. It gives a sense of uniqueness to the individual. The OS participants realized an individuality of the objects of their desire in the fact that what constituted the object constituted nothing else.

Open codes/ phrases – felt every inch of her bulbous body, I love the design and the shape of her crown, he’s hard and angular, the roundness of his counterweights at the top, he’s noble and proud and strong, elegant lines of his gondola, proper name for the object, gender of the object, pronouns based on gender, she’s wise and poised.

The physical dimensions of the object personality extrapolated an abstract personality of the object as well. These were personality traits that are usually non-manifest physically but are nonetheless inferred from physical attributes. Participants sensed nobility, pride, childishness, and other abstract dimensions in the objects of their desire thereby evaluating them in anthropocentric terms.

The country’s flag is very childish. Very, you know, they’re very childish. They’re very kid like to me. They’re just... They’re not serious at all. They’re very silly. (Linda)

As humans, the idea of evaluating material objects in humane ways is not one that is previously unheard of or uncommon. The literature on anthropomorphism has discussed the human tendency of transference and attribution of human qualities to non-humans, including objects (Osawa, Mukai, & Imai, 2007), animals (Eddy, Gallup, & Povinelli, 1993), weather patterns (Hard, 2004), and divine beings (Fischer, 1991). Users of a certain product, be it home appliances, automobiles, or even household furniture tend to consider them not just in terms of their functionality but with a personality that they can relate to (Jordon, 2002; Brunel & Kumar, 2007). Based on different designs of an object of everyday use like an iron, Govers, Hekkert, and Schoormans (2004) proved that consumers recognized certain irons to be happy, cute, and tough. Designers deliberately confer products with a certain personality which runs parallel to the capability of the product. This helps make the interaction between the product and the user more engaging than just typical functional use (Mugge, Govers, & Schoormans, 2008).

Table 1: Details of OS Participants and their Objects of Desire

OS Participant (Name changed)	Object Category	Material of the Object	Gender of the Object
Patricia	Monument A	Metal	Female
	Monument B	Concrete	Male
	Heavy vehicle	Metal	Male
	Sports equipment	Metal	Male
	Bridge	Concrete	Male
Jake	Automobile	Metal	Female
Linda	Monument C	Metal	Female
	Household decorative artefact	Wood	Male
Kylie	Heavy vehicle	Metal	Male
	Park ride	Metal	Male

It was observed that all the objects of desire of all the OS participants were made from elements that were either in their natural state like different metals or were close to their natural states like concrete and wood. Materials that were processed extensively like plastic and styrofoam were considered to be unappealing and non-attractive by the OS participants.

I am drawn to objects that adapt to their surrounding temperature and have a weight to themselves. Metal and concrete are generally the components of such structures. I love being in their presence and feel secure with them. Their strength is what makes me feel safe. (Patricia)

OS participants also recognized a gender in the objects of their desire which constituted an important aspect of the object personality. The recognition of gender not only played a crucial role in the construction of the personality of the object but was also a means to raise the objects' existence beyond its functional purpose. Considering objects with a gender that is generally meant for human beings helped alleviate their existence away from impersonal relating to interpersonal relating for the OS participants.

Finally, she was with me. I named her Vanilla. It seemed a miracle to me. We were destined to be man and car. We were meant to be lovers. (Jake)

An "it" way of referring to the object meant that it is a means to an end whereas, for the OS participants, the objects of their desire were the ends themselves - significant partners in their relationship.

Just go through the day and switch the pronouns of the people in your life to 'it' and see how uncomfortable it feels to reference . . . This is mainly a problem in the English language whereas some other languages assign pronouns with a perceived gender. Gender specifically refers to the sexual organs and objects have neither male nor female genitalia. I am well aware objects have no gender but I prefer never to use "it" to describe an object that I connect to. To choose a proper pronoun, I generally get a sense of which best describes the object. (Patricia)

Conclusively, an identified gender and the physical appearance of the object made for the personality of the object sensed by the OS participants. However, the role of the object in the construction of this personality was not just limited to its existence. The personality of the object for the OS participants was not a mental construction conferred by them, but engendered intrinsically from the object. For recognition of personality as an intrinsic feature, it needs to manifest from the object and not be conferred from human consciousness. The second dimension identified from OS participant interviews to conceptualize objects from a communication perspective primarily performs that function. Object consciousness, identified as the second component of conceptualizing the object, recognizes them as animate, reciprocating bodies.

OS individuals do not just sense a personality that is based on the physical appearance of the object. They identify with the object at a level much deeper than just tangible matter. They recognize the presence of a soul or a spirit in the object. The role of the object in human-object communication for OS individuals is hence not of dead, inanimate matter but of conscious, energy possessing entities. Participants reported their perennial experience of sensing a soul that matures over time in objects made from natural elements.

Open codes/ phrases – there is a sense of being, a soul in the objects, spiritual existence in all things, he knows my presence and I know his, I felt a reciprocal feedback, she was alive and I know it, spirit evolves over the life of the object.

I believe that all things in nature and things from elements possess a spirit. I am as much aware of the spiritual existence in objects as in humans... I am as much aware of the spiritual existence in all things as one is aware of each individual in their vehicles stuck in traffic. I know they are there but I am

disconnected to many of them by matter of relationship. One can feel alone sitting at an airport surrounded by strangers. Most objects are just strangers to me that I have not met. (Jake)

The implication of objects being conscious is not to say that they are biologically alive, but to negate the notion that they are static and dispirited. Referring to the animate nature of any material object that exists, Linssen (1958) states, “that which is commonly called an object is a provisional state of movement, a state whose limits we can only rarely define either in time or space.” The experience of OS participants elucidates that energy is manifest in the forms of vibrations at a molecular level and objects are capable of reciprocation through this energy store.

One cannot deny that on the molecular level, objects possess a great deal of energy forces. Though not seen with the naked eye, a scientist will not deny the compression and tension forces in them. They are made of matter and fall prey to entropy just as everything else. (Patricia)

It was also observed that since the participants aligned to a belief which was otherwise unpopular, they were well versed and had read extensively on ideas that supported their beliefs. This was primarily out of the curiosity to seek clarification, and further their knowledge about generally considered eccentric beliefs that they held. From philosophical arguments about the nature of the material world to scientific discussions on energy at the molecular level, the OS participants had explanations supporting their way of life where material objects are conscious entities.

Our human perspective is filled with myriad concepts and fragile beliefs as to what constitutes as meaningful consciousness. Let’s confess, half the time we are merely pretending. What we see when our eyes open at the moment we emerge from birth, our first cry, and the voice we hear to calm us, the hunger in our hearts and stomachs, the soft touch from those who love us, the music, the aromas of richness and delights surround all of us as we grow. I think it is the same with every molecule in every form everywhere. (Jake)

The idea of a spirit or a soul harbouring in material objects rendered them with a consciousness that the OS participants claimed to interact with. It was the seamless merger of the consciousness of the participant connecting with the spirit of the object that formed the basis of the communicative encounter between the two bodies.

People can love objects but they love them to a certain degree more or less for practical purposes. That’s why they don’t see the soul of the object, whereas when you truly truly are interested in an object and you’re willing to bare your soul then you see theirs. They (objects) are what they are and their feelings are respective to their spirits and cannot be defined by human standards. (Kylie)

Consciousness being a faculty only possessed by living things has been contested over the years by philosophers in both, eastern and western hemispheres. Besides, many tribes across the globe live with the belief that consciousness is not just limited to biologically living things but objects too. OS participants, perhaps, make up for a unique urban population cohort that lives by this belief. Hence, to answer the first research question for the OS participants, it can be said that the object in human-object communication is conceptualized as a personality bearing, and energy-possessing conscious entity. It spans beyond just functional, dead matter, assembled in a particular fashion to a body imbued with a conscious spirit and personality.

Discussion

At first, the recognition of a spirit or a soul in an object might seem like an outlandish and eccentric idea based purely on personal beliefs. Should it then not be considered worthy of mention because of the lack of perceivability or empirical validity? Pearce and Branham (1978) have argued against the exclusion of “mystical insights, rapturous peak experiences, artistic perception or religious ecstasy” from scholarly purview. Terming them as imaginary and not real by standards of a particular culture, subjective spiritual experiences are often disregarded as unworthy of scientific inquiry. These denials are based on the thought that defines reality only in terms of that which can be seen, touched, smelled, tasted, or heard. Owing to the popularity and preference of the positivist view of research in the twentieth century, to see objects as conscious entities, possessing either a soul or a spirit was not very popular for a considerable epoch (Koch, 2014). However, it is also not an idea that is previously unheard of. From Plato to Baruch Spinoza, Arthur Schopenhauer, Roger Penrose, and Bertrand Russell, philosophers across ages have hinted at the presence of some degree of consciousness in all matter that exists (Stapp, 2011). Termed as “panpsychism” by sixteenth-century Italian philosopher, Francesco Patrizi, the idea that consciousness is fundamental to matter and all matter possesses a mind or a mind-like quality is gaining academic credibility in the recent years (Goldhill, 2018). From spoons to rocks to the Eiffel Tower, all objects have an “unimaginable simple” form of consciousness is a view held by many philosophers as well as quantum physicists and neuroscientists too (Tononi & Koch, 2015; Hardy, 2017; Chalmers, *The singularity: A philosophical analysis*, 2010).

Initially thought of as an idea originating in mysticism and closely associated to other doctrines like pantheism and animism, panpsychism gained popularity in academia after the failure of traditional attempts to explain consciousness in terms of other fundamental concepts like space, time, and mass. Fundamental laws in physics, like the laws of gravity or of quantum mechanics, are explained using these fundamental blocks. But there appear phenomena that at times cannot be explained using the existing fundamental blocks and hence the list expands. An example is Maxwell’s discovery of electric charge as a fundamental element to explain an electromagnetic phenomenon in the nineteenth century. Known as the “hard problem of consciousness” the challenge is to explain consciousness in terms of the already existing fundamental blocks and therefore Chalmers (2014) suggests including “consciousness itself as something fundamental, a fundamental building block of nature.”

Since the panpsychist view and attempts to prove consciousness as fundamental are still finding ground in academia, to conclusively state that objects have consciousness (of any degree) would be a premature move. However, the subjective experience of sensing consciousness in objects, possessing a soul or a spirit by the OS participants makes for an important aspect of their lived realities and cannot be ignored.

Alongside, consciousness being an attribute not only limited to biologically living beings but material objects as well, afforded OS participants to conceptualize objects as more than just mass and matter. The objects’ existence then does not just stay limited to its function but gets amplified by a uniqueness. One can relate this to the concept of “thouness” proposed by the philosopher Martin Buber in his book “*I and Thou*.” Buber (1958) proposed that humans tend to relate to other human in two extreme ways. One, in an “I-It” manner, where the person in question treats the other as an object. One treats the other as an interchangeable and categorical body, as a mere “thing,” and as a means to an end but certainly not as ends in and of themselves. The “Its” are although people, we to some extent dehumanize them and relate to them as we would to an expendable material object. The relation is nothing more than that of a subject-object. The second way of relating termed as the “I-Thou” manner enables the

person in question to see the other as a unique whole. We are acutely aware of the “uniqueness” of the other and of their essential one-of-a-kindness. We see the other as less of a member of a stereotyped grouping and more in terms of their special distinguishing characteristics and qualities. We savor that which we encounter and treat as a “Thou” rather than treating it as just another interchangeable member of its class. We also see the senses in which the other is “immeasurable,” in which no exhaustive attempt to summarize it through quantitative assessment will ever fully exhaust its nature. The two extreme ways of relating were moderated by an “I-You” manner by Wood (2015). In this people acknowledge the other as more than just a means but do not engage with the other as unique individuals. Usually the Buber model is applied to inter-human interaction and used to identify and comment upon “impersonal” relating versus “interpersonal” relating (Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna, 2004). However, recognizing objects with a personality as well as consciousness deems them worthy of being experienced as unique, and immeasurable.

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