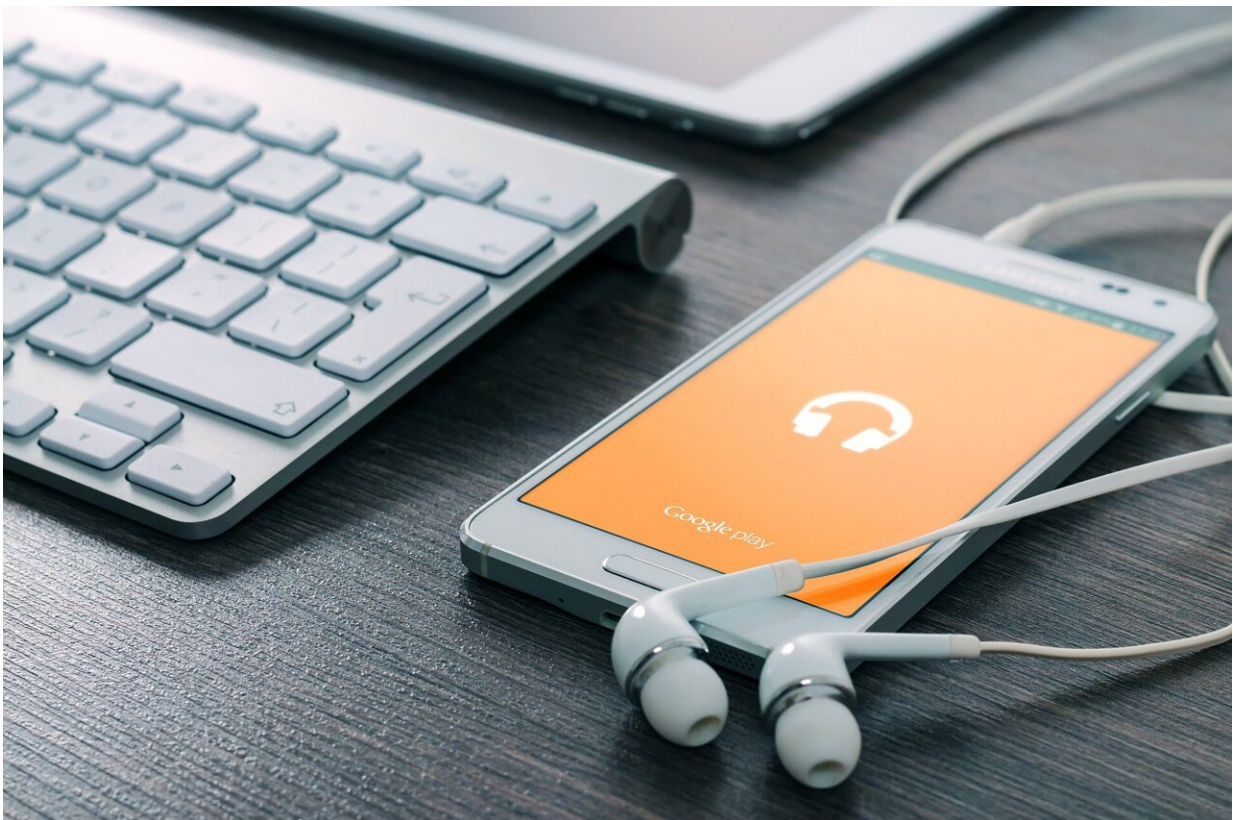# Why doesn't my digital music feel like 'mine'? Three ways digital possessions reduce our sense of ownership

April 17 2024, by Rebecca Mardon

Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Our possessions—the things we view as "mine"—play an important role in our lives. Beyond their functionality, they can serve as poignant

reminders of cherished memories. They can symbolize not only who we are, but also who we used to be, and who we aspire to become.

From faded photo albums to treasured jewelry passed down through generations, each possession has a tale to tell. But how do our relationships with our possessions differ when they only exist digitally?

Our music, films, books and photographs are increasingly accessed via digital platforms rather than stored on our shelves. Do these digital items really feel like "mine" in the same way that physical possessions do? And can they become as personally meaningful?

I interviewed 25 people multiple times over seven years, tracing their evolving relationships with their digital possessions. My research found that people often experience a weaker sense of ownership over their digital possessions and perceive them as less meaningful than their physical counterparts.

Woven through my participants' stories were narratives of disappointment—their digital possessions frequently failed to meet their expectations. Here are three key ways these possessions can disappoint us:

1. Restrictions

We develop a sense of ownership over objects by exerting control over them, whether through simple tasks like cleaning our car and organizing our bookshelves, or more intentional customisation. However, unexpected restrictions can reduce our sense of control over our digital possessions.

My participants encountered restrictions on how digital items could be customized and displayed, and on whether items could be passed on to or

shared with their loved ones. For instance, while music-lover Eve could freely arrange her [vinyl records](#), her [digital music](#) organization was restricted by iTunes' display options:

My digital music is … kind of mine, kind of not […] I don't feel ownership to the same extent as my records. I haven't been able to put my stamp on the collection in the same way, everything's just automated and generic. iTunes organizes it, not me. So, it doesn't feel as personal … it doesn't feel mine in the same way.

The [rigid structure](#) imposed by the platform left Eve feeling frustrated, and diminished her sense of ownership.

2. Instability

Possessions are often valued for their enduring nature, which allows them to serve as repositories of memories and meaning.

My participants often assumed that their digital possessions would mirror the stability of their tangible possessions. However, [companies frequently retain the power to modify or delete digital items](#), rendering our digital possessions unstable.

For instance, David became frustrated when the covers of his Kindle ebooks were unexpectedly replaced with new versions reflecting recent TV or film adaptations:

How do you stop Kindle from updating the covers? They don't need you to give them access, because they gave themselves access to all of your possessions the second you signed up … and if they can change the covers, it makes you worry about what else they're able to do, whether one day they'll just disappear altogether.

David is right to be concerned. [Amazon famously came under fire](#) for remotely deleting copies of ebooks from users' Kindle devices. More recently, in December 2023, PlayStation users were shocked to learn of the company's plans to [delete purchased TV shows](#) from their libraries, though the move was later [reversed due to backlash](#).

Such incidents highlight the instability of digital possessions, leaving users wary of forming deep attachments.

3. Invisibility

Participants yearned for the types of serendipitous encounters prompted by their physical possessions, lamenting their digital possessions' inability to evoke unexpected moments of reminiscence. Their [digital content](#) was often largely invisible when not in use—hidden within devices and easily forgotten.

Alice observed that the physical books on her shelves unexpectedly caught her eye, evoking fond memories. In contrast, her ebooks lacked visibility and were therefore unable to remind her of the important moments they were associated with:

They're just not "there" like my other books are. They're, like, in the depths of my Kindle, hidden away … They don't remind you they're there in the same way that [physical] books do. When I've finished a book on the Kindle, it's just archived and discarded, and I doubt that I'd look at it again.

Alice refused to let the memories associated with her favorite stories fade. Instead, whenever an ebook developed special significance, she purchased a physical copy to display prominently on her bookshelves, where it could attract her attention and prompt unexpected nostalgia.

Avoiding disappointment

My research revealed that digital possessions often fail to provide the control, stability and visibility that we have come to expect from our possessions. This can prompt us to lower our expectations, to avoid future disappointment.

My participants frequently resolved that digital products would never be truly "mine" and couldn't develop the personal significance of their physical counterparts. Many consciously distanced themselves from these items, avoiding strong attachments. Others, like Alice, turned to physical items to replace or complement their digital possessions. This may explain, in part, the resurgence of analog formats, such as vinyl records.

However, while our digital possessions often fall short, many of us yearn to establish a deeper sense of ownership over these items and to forge more meaningful connections with them. Through thoughtful design, companies can transform digital possessions from sources of disappointment to sources of delight.

For instance, limiting unnecessary updates can increase stability, making us less anxious about becoming attached to digital items. Facilitating the types of transfers consumers are accustomed to in the offline realm (for instance, allowing users to pass on a finished ebook to a friend) can enhance users' sense of control. And giving digital objects greater visibility through enduring displays and push notifications can enable them to prompt the unexpected moments of reminiscence that people miss in the digital realm.

More information: Rebecca Mardon et al, "Kind of Mine, Kind of

Not": Digital Possessions and Affordance Misalignment, *Journal of Consumer Research* (2022). DOI: 10.1093/jcr/ucac057

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