

The ROVA Project

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Cover image: a peek at my creative work, presented in
Chapter 6 and discussed and analysed in Chapters 7 and 8.

A graphic consisting of a large red circle with the text 'Originality Statement' in white. This red circle is partially overlapped by a larger, lighter red circle and a thin white circle, creating a layered effect.

Originality Statement

I hereby certify that the work embodied in the thesis is my own work, conducted under normal supervision. The thesis contains no material which has been accepted, or is being examined, for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968 and any approved embargo.

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Dedication

To my partner Bryce Amner

who has been with me all the way

and my father Vern Cloke

who would have loved to have been



Abstract

This PhD thesis and accompanying creative work explore how design practice can generate new insights into people's relationship with their possessions, in particular the role of gratitude in these relationships. These insights have the potential to be deployed to help combat consumerism.

This research makes original contributions to the discipline of design, by:

- developing a prototype of the world's first "thankable" appliance – a robot vacuum cleaner – using speculative/critical design (SCD), as well as a framework for expressing gratitude to it; and
- using this prototype to generate user-experience data, including information on how people might respond to a "real" thankable appliance, whether people would purchase one, and why.

This project also helps fills some gaps in existing research, by:

- combining elements of both ritual and care in a designed artefact, a combination of concerns that has not been extensively explored by design practitioners and theorists; and
- helping rectify the lack of SCD research projects that address issues of gender.

The thesis begins with a brief exposition of the scope and impact of consumerism, followed by an analysis of decluttering and minimalist living, social trends frequently presented as effective counter-behaviours. Through critically engaging with the

literature, I question these practices' claims to effectiveness. Instead, my analysis suggests that interventions targeted at encouraging people to become mindful and *care-ful* consumers may far be more successful.

In investigating how to design such interventions I draw on insights from scholarship and practice in the area of ritual – a field beginning to be explored fruitfully by designers for its ability to enrich user-experiences. I combine this with findings from research into care from a range of disciplines including feminism and ecology.

Using the method of practice-based research and building on research and creative precedents from two fields of experience-based design – emotionally durable design and speculative/critical design (SCD) – I present and critique several iterations of my own design work. This culminates in the development of a speculative, thankable robot vacuum cleaner branded ROVA (Relationally Optimised Vacuum Assistant). This concept is fully realised into an interactive exhibition – The ROVA Project – at which visitors are invited to complete a feedback survey on the effectiveness of the exhibition and the potential of the concept of a thankable appliance.

Interrogation of this data – using a combination of content analysis (quantitative) and thematic analysis (qualitative) – finds that the exhibition effectively prompted visitors to reflect on their relationship with their possessions and the role of thankfulness in enhancing the emotional durability of consumer products. The majority of respondents indicate they would open to purchasing a thankable appliance should such products be developed.

KEYWORDS

Consumerism, material possessions, ritual, care, emotionally durable design, speculative/critical design (SCD), gratitude.



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