How tech firms make us feel like we own their apps—and how that benefits them
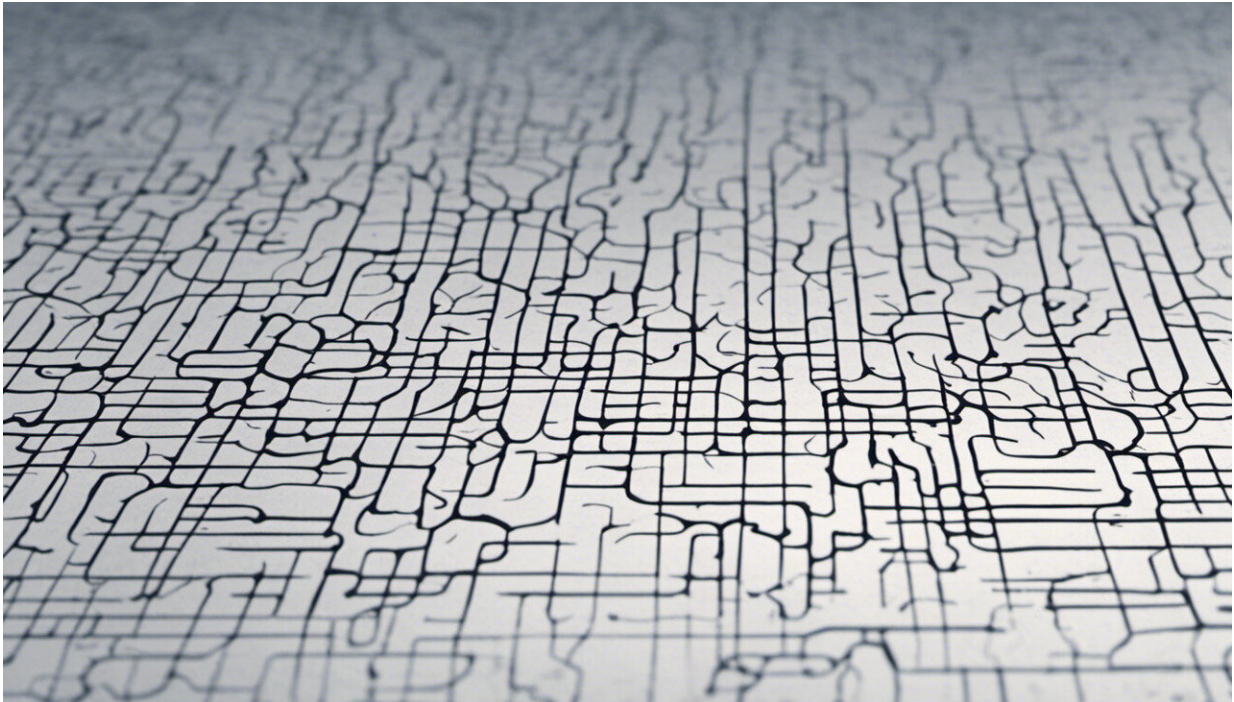
July 16 2019, by Melody Zou

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

Possessions are going out of fashion. An endless stream of media reports claim millennials – that amorphous mass of people born in the 1980s and 1990s who have grown up with the internet and digital technology—are in favour of accessing rather than owning stuff.

And yet my research shows that owning possessions is still something millennials hunger for. It is just that these possessions are now digital rather than physical.

People who become heavy users of the apps they download can develop deep relationships with these services, so deep that they take on what we call "psychological ownership" of them. This means they perceive each app as something that belongs just to them and has effectively become an extension of themselves. After using it frequently and adjusting the settings to their liking, it becomes "my app," even though their rights to use the service and transfer their data are actually restricted and their accounts can be terminated at any time.

Psychological ownership can benefit the companies because it leads users to take on valuable extra roles. In the real world, companies have long pushed for shoppers to give feedback, recommend their products and help other shoppers. App "owners" are willingly doing all of this in the digital sphere and often with more expertise and commitment than traditional consumers.

My colleagues and I studied this phenomenon for users of music streaming apps such as Spotify and QQ Music and found that they went the extra mile in four ways. They provided services such as answering the queries of other users on internet forums or offering other information that would enrich the experience of users. They improved the app by giving the company feedback or taking part in the app's governance. They advocated for the app by championing it in public or defending it against critics. And they financed the service by paying a premium fee or even donating money.

By interviewing more than 200 users of these music streaming services, we also found that companies use three key experiences to encourage users to become "owners."

Control

We all have a strong desire to exert control and influence on our environment. [Research has shown](#) people gain satisfaction and a boost in [self-esteem](#) by [changing their surroundings](#), and we found the same desire among app users to control their digital space.

Users want autonomy to use the app at their own pace and in their own way. They do this by changing the settings to suit their interests and tastes. They can choose what notifications they receive or by which channel. They can skip or hide content. They can decide who they want to share their activity with.

Through this process, they learn how to use the app and see their influence on it, gradually gaining a sense that they can control it and so perceive it to be "their" Spotify or Apple Music.

Self-identity

Past generations of young people put posters on their bedroom wall, wore t-shirts with slogans and displayed rows of vinyl or CDs as a show of who they were and what they believed in. Now this demonstration takes place online too. Self-identity is curated in the digital sphere.

Music apps allow users to express themselves by creating a library of likes and sharing the music that appeals to them. They can create their own playlists for any mood or occasion: the homework playlist, the party list or bath-time music.

The more you explore and listen to music, the more the app's algorithms understand your likes and dislikes. And so the service becomes more tailored to your personality. It becomes "your" service and is trained to

look like you. You can even upload your profile pictures and decorate your homepage in your own style.

Apps that allow users to sync their accounts across different devices further reinforce this sense of personalised identity.

Sense of home

"To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul," said French philosopher Simone Weil in her 1952 book [The Need for Roots](#).

App designers do well when they recognise this need. As well as looking for a digital space to store their creations and memory, users want to build a sense of home, their own place within the app, somewhere familiar and comfortable.

Some [mobile apps](#) have tapped into this longing, allowing users to store their memories and history within the app. For instance, a timeline or statistics feature allows users to look back on what they have done on the app and what music they have listened to.

This sense of history can also be made more tangible by creating playlists of a user's top songs of the year, or reminding them of past events they had on the app, or even with a review of the person's usage on the app.

Profitable relationship

These three experiences mean that users are able to build a relationship with a faceless technology such as a mobile app through psychological ownership.

Once deeply engaged in this kind of relationship with their app, users are then more likely to undertake voluntary contributions for the good of the technology. That can be helpful for the community of other users but ultimately is a major benefit for the company profiting from all that hard work.

This article is republished from The Conversation under a Creative Commons license. Read the original article.

Provided by The Conversation