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Research Article

How inferred contagion biases dispositional judgments of others☆

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Abstract

Drawing on recent evidence suggesting that beliefs about contagion underlie the market for celebrity-contaminated objects, the current work investigates how people can make biased dispositional judgments about consumers who own such objects. Results from four experiments indicate that when a consumer comes in contact with a celebrity-contaminated object and behaves in a manner that is inconsistent with the traits associated with that celebrity, people tend to make more extreme judgments of them. For instance, if the celebrity excels at a particular task, but the target who has come into contact with the celebrity-contaminated object performs poorly, people reflect more harshly on the target. This occurs because observers implicitly expect that a consumer will behave in a way that is consistent with the traits associated with the source of contamination. Consistent with the law of contagion, these expectations only emerge when contact occurs. Our findings suggest that owning celebrity-contaminated objects signals information about how one might behave in the future, which consequently has social implications for consumers who own such objects.

Keywords: Contagion; Contamination; Signaling; Dispositional judgments

Introduction

Ever wonder what people think of a person who pays $5000 for JFK's boxer shorts (CNN, 2003) or $75,000 for a teacup used by Lady Gaga (Palmer, 2014)? Celebrity memorabilia is a serious and booming business in North America. Marquee Capital, for example, is an investment firm that specializes in selling items previously owned and used by prominent artists such as Madonna (Marquee Capital, 2016). The notion that such mundane objects will not only retain their value, but even appreciate, has sparked a wealth of research on the psychological underpinnings of the thriving market for secondhand celebrity goods. One explanation is that consumers believe that some part of the celebrity, such as their soul or essence, has been imbued into the objects they have used (Newman, Diesendruck, & Bloom, 2011). Much of this has to do with the law of contagion.

The law of contagion explains why people tend to value objects that admired celebrities have come into physical contact with more so than objects that they have owned but never touched (Newman & Bloom, 2014). In particular, it has been theorized that people behave as though the essence of an object's previous owner is inherent in the object itself (Gelman, 2003; Newman et al., 2011). This is consistent with the finding that people are willing to pay more for George Clooney's sweater as long as it has not since been dry-cleaned (Newman et al., 2011). It is as if the "Clooney Cooties," as Bloom (2011) put it, could be sterilized away. Critically, this was not the only finding of note from Newman et al. (2011). A lesser discussed observation was that people were also willing to pay less for George Clooney's sweater if they were forbidden from telling anyone that Clooney had previously worn it (Bloom, 2011).

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This highlights how the law of contagion may play a role in conspicuous consumption.

If there is indeed a social signaling motive to owning contaminated celebrity goods, this raises the question of whether the signal incorporates the essence of the celebrity, and if so, whether this essence then transfers in the eyes of an observer. For the sake of simplicity, we use the term celebrity in the definitional sense of the word, as someone being well-known or famous for having specific qualities, accomplishments, or traits (Leslie, 2011; Oxford Dictionary, 2016; Turner, 2013). Given that people make inferences about others based on the products they own (Bellezza, Gino, & Keinan, 2014; Shavitt & Nelson, 1999), it seems plausible that there may be social implications to owning and, in particular, having contact with products that have been previously used by celebrities. Importantly, this also implies the possibility that such signals could backfire.

Evidence suggests people believe traits such as moral qualities and abilities can transfer through mere physical contact (Kramer & Block, 2014; Nemeroff & Rozin, 1994). Such contact can be indirect and take place by way of a *vehicle*, such as a product (Rozin & Nemeroff, 2002). Thus, if Tiger Woods used a putter that was later sold on auction, people may implicitly believe that some aspect of Tiger Woods has transferred to the putter's new owner. This could have important implications given that people often draw upon information about someone's inferred traits in order to predict how they might behave in the future (Jones & Skarlicki, 2005; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1981). It is in this sense that signaling ownership of a celebrity object may elicit an expectation that the new owner will perform accordingly, bringing about unintended consequences if the new owner does not meet these expectations. For example, if someone were to miss a putt while using Tiger Woods' putter, others may infer that this individual is rather poor at golf—a judgment that would be more severe than if they had missed with a generic putter. This has interesting implications given that it would suggest the high prices paid for celebrity owned goods may be telling others much more about the buyer than their social status or degree of fandom.

Taken as a whole, this research lends several important theoretical insights. First, we identify a novel signal communicated by celebrity contaminated goods and the social implications of this signal. Specifically, our results indicate that the essence of an object's previous user is incorporated into the signal that observers receive. Furthermore, we find that by being observed with an object previously used by a celebrity (as opposed to one that was merely owned but never used), consumers influence what others expect from them. Subsequently, when a target's behavior violates those expectations, dispositional judgments about the target are augmented. This can be good or bad. For instance, if the source of contamination excels at a particular task (i.e., positive contagion), yet the target who has come into contact with the product performs poorly, people tend to attribute the poor performance to a lack of ability (Studies 1 and 2) or competence (Study 3). Conversely, if the source of contamination is known to be immoral (i.e., negative contagion), yet the target who has come into contact with the product behaves morally, people infer greater dispositional morality (Study 4). Critically, we demonstrate that this effect is driven by expectations, which are set as a result of having contact with the contaminated object.

Conceptual development

Signaling through consumption

Extant research suggests that consumption offers a rich means of communicating information about oneself (Belk, 1988; Miller, 2009; Saad, 2013; Veblen, 1899/2005). As Veblen (1899/2005) observed, people sometimes purchase expensive and ostentatious products merely to demonstrate that they can afford to do so. However, people often use products to convey much more complex signals than mere economic standing. For example, products can communicate group membership (Cialdini et al., 1976; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 2013), personality (Miller, 2009; Vazire & Gosling, 2004), and even the devotion of a romantic partner (Wang & Griskevicius, 2014). It is in this sense that consumers are perpetual signal senders. However, in order for a signal to be effective, it must be reliably received by a passive observer (Dunham, 2011; Searcy & Nowicki, 2005).

When attempting to understand what kind of person someone is, observers often consider consumption-related cues (Bellezza et al., 2014; Haire, 1950; Shavitt & Nelson, 1999). Indeed, researchers have found that people make trait inferences about consumers based on the products they use, such as the clothing they own (Burroughs, Drews, & Hallman, 1991) or their music preferences (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2006). Furthermore, observing consumption often provides an inferential basis for forming expectations about a person (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002; Sundie et al., 2011). For example, someone who purchases a rock music CD may be perceived as extraverted and therefore more likely to be outgoing and to value an exciting lifestyle (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2007).

To date, much of the work on signaling through consumption has focused on how expectations about a consumer are predominantly derived from the inherent features of the products they own (Bellezza et al., 2014; Miller, 2009; Rentfrow & Gosling, 2007). Such features might include the tempo of a song (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003) or a car's brand name (Sundie et al., 2011). However, recent evidence suggests people also reason about the unique history of individual objects (Bloom, 2011; Gelman, Manczak, Was, & Noles, 2016; Newman & Bloom, 2014). For example, the value placed on a seemingly ordinary sweater can be increased if the owner can convey that the sweater was worn by an admired celebrity (Newman et al., 2011). Thus, in addition to the inherent features a particular object might possess, the object's history is also incorporated into its overall signaling value (Bloom, 2011; Gelman, 2003). One of the main reasons consumers put such emphasis on the history of an object is because of the human tendency to believe that objects can retain the essence of the object's creator or previous owner (Nemeroff & Rozin, 1994; Newman & Bloom, 2012). This inference finds its roots in the