



Short Communication

The need to belong motivates demand for authentic objects



George E. Newman*, Rosanna K. Smith

Yale School of Management, New Haven, CT 06520, United States

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ABSTRACT

The present studies examine how demand for certain types of authentic objects is related to a more fundamental need to form social connections with others. Specifically, Experiment 1 demonstrates that manipulating the need to belong leads to greater valuation of celebrity memorabilia. Experiment 2 provides converging evidence by demonstrating that individual differences in the need to belong moderate the relationship between beliefs in essence transfer (i.e., contagion) and valuation. This paper lends insight into the underlying motives behind demand for authentic objects and, more broadly, reinforces the compensatory role of consumption in satisfying core psychological needs.

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1. Introduction

People are willing to pay a premium for products and experiences they perceive as authentic (Frazier, Gelman, Wilson, & Hood, 2009; Newman & Dhar, 2014; Newman, Diesendruck, & Bloom, 2011). Though the meaning of the term “authenticity” may vary widely (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Newman & Smith, 2016; Wang, 1999), there appears to be one subtype of authenticity that references a common set of characteristics. Consider one-of-a-kind objects such as an original Picasso painting, Shakespeare’s desk, or your grandmother’s wedding ring. Such objects seem to be valued, at least in part, because of their connections to particular individuals.

Converging research using both qualitative (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; O’Guinn, 1991) and empirical approaches (Frazier et al., 2009; Newman & Bloom, 2012; Newman & Dhar, 2014; Newman et al., 2011) has related the valuation of this type of authenticity to beliefs in contagion. Contagion is commonly thought of as a form of magical thinking in which a person’s essence is transferred to an object through physical contact (Belk, 1988; Bloom, 2011; Frazer, 1890; Nemeroff & Rozin, 1994; Rozin, Nemeroff, Wane, & Sherrod, 1989). Therefore, people may value an original painting or a celebrity’s possession because they believe that those particular objects contain some physical remnant of the person, whereas otherwise identical objects do not.

This paper examines how preferences for these types of objects (hereafter, “contagion objects”) are informed by deeper psychological

motivations. While contagion provides insights regarding the underlying mechanism, it does not explain why people may desire such objects in the first place. In other words, why would people want to own an object that contains another person’s essence?

Research on contagion has distinguished positive from negative contagion (Argo, Dahl, & Morales, 2008; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). The motivation for wanting to avoid negative contagion objects (e.g., Hitler’s sweater) is well understood. Individuals feel disgust toward potential sources of microbial contamination (e.g., spoiled food or bodily waste), but may also feel disgust toward violations of moral principles (Haidt, Rozin, McCauley, & Imada, 1997; Rozin, Fischler, Imada, Sarubin, & Wrzesniewski, 1999). Therefore, negative contagion is often explained as a false application of microbial contamination to the domain of morality (Lindeman & Svedholm, 2012; Rozin et al., 1999). In cases of positive contagion, however, observers do not feel disgust toward the source, but rather attraction and liking (Newman et al., 2011). And conceptually, there is not the ability for positive characteristics to ‘infect’ objects in the way that toxins or diseases might. Thus, to date, it is unclear what may ultimately motivate people to want to acquire positive contagion objects.

One explanation might simply be that people want to own objects that others do not. However, Newman and Bloom (2014) found that while contact between a celebrity and an object positively predicted an object’s value at auction, the degree of association with a celebrity (e.g., a monogrammed shirt vs. a generic one) had little effect. A second explanation may be that people want to feel a sense of control or dominance over others. But, dominance is often associated with negative attitudes toward subordinates (Duckitt, 2006), while, in the case of positive contagion, the individual is often revered.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: george.newman@yale.edu (G.E. Newman), rosanna.smith@yale.edu (R.K. Smith).

Here we propose that the valuation of positive contagion objects is importantly related to the need to belong—the desire to form and maintain social relationships with others. Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggest that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation that explains much of social behavior. If this need is not regularly met, people experience a variety of negative emotional and cognitive effects, such as losses in self-esteem (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995), increases in stress hormones (Slavich, Way, Eisenberger, & Taylor, 2010), and a weakened immune system (Cacioppo, Hawkley, & Berntson, 2003).

Further, individuals will actively engage in a host of substitution behaviors to restore feelings of belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). For example, when people are threatened with social exclusion, they are more likely to buy products that signal group membership (Mead, Baumeister, Stillman, Rawns, & Vohs, 2011); they are more likely to consume nostalgic items (Loveland, Smeesters, & Mandel, 2010; Wildschut, Sedikides, Routledge, Arndt, & Cordero, 2010); and, they are more likely to anthropomorphize inanimate objects (Epley, Waytz, Akalis, & Cacioppo, 2008; Powers, Worsham, Freeman, Wheatley, & Heatherton, 2014). Relatedly, developmental research finds that young children will not substitute their “attachment objects”—objects that serve as a psychological substitute for the child’s parent(s)—for identical duplicates (Hood & Bloom, 2008).

These findings suggest a plausible conceptual link between the need to belong and the valuation of contagion objects. Specifically, people may demand contagion objects because those objects are believed to contain the essence of a well-regarded person and therefore, may serve as a substitute for having actual contact with that individual. This predicts that enhancing the need to belong should increase the desire for contagion objects. Moreover, differences in the need to belong should be a key moderator linking beliefs in essence transfer (i.e., contagion) to the valuation of contagion objects.

1.1. Overview of Experiments

These predictions were tested in two experiments. Experiment 1 establishes a causal relationship by manipulating the need to belong and measuring the resulting valuation of celebrity memorabilia. Experiment 2 provides converging evidence by demonstrating that individual differences in the need to belong moderate the relationship between contagion and valuation.

2. Experiment 1

2.1. Methods

We recruited 147 adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 24.94$, 64.6% female) to a laboratory on campus. Participants were first asked to play the “Cyberball” game before completing a series of tasks. Cyberball is a well-established task designed to temporarily induce feelings of social exclusion (Williams & Jarvis, 2006; Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004).¹

After playing the game, participants completed a manipulation check (Zadro et al., 2004) in which they reported the degree to

¹ Participants sat in front of a laptop computer. Depicted on the screen were three “Cyberball” icons, intended to represent the participant and two other players (who were described as players online). Participants did not have additional information about the other players (who were in fact, fictional). We operationalized the level of exclusion versus inclusion by programming the number of ball tosses thrown to the participant. The game consisted of a total of 30 throws. In the exclusion condition, the participant received three tosses at the beginning of the game and then never received another toss. In the inclusion condition, the participant received one-third of the tosses.

which they felt socially rejected (see Appendix A). Following, participants were shown pairs of identical objects that were designed to measure the valuation of positive contagion. Critically, both objects were said to belong to their favorite celebrity, but only one of the objects had physical contact with them. (A sample object pair appears in Appendix A.) Participants were presented with three pairs of objects (presented in random order), which consisted of sweaters owned by their favorite actor, guitar picks owned by their favorite musician, and helmets owned by their favorite athlete.

For each of the pair of objects, participants responded to the following: *Please state to what degree you would prefer to own Item A over Item B (1 = No preference, 9 = Strongly prefer to own Item A); Please state to what degree you value Item A over the average (sweater/guitar pick/helmet) (1 = No preference, 9 = Strongly value Item A more); Please state to what degree you would be willing to pay a premium to own Item A over Item B (1 = Not willing, 9 = Very willing).* Participants also indicated how much more they would be willing to pay (in dollars) for the object that had physical contact with the celebrity. Additionally, we randomized the order in which participants completed the manipulation check and the valuation measures to ensure that there was not an effect of the manipulation check itself.

In addition, participants completed the 10-item need for belonging scale (NBS-10) (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2013), which is an established instrument that assesses individual differences in the need to belong, and the 20-item Positive Affect and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS) (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), which assesses positive and negative mood. Finally, participants filled out an attention check (in which they were asked to select two specified terms from a 19-item list) and reported basic demographic information.

2.1.1. Scale construction

To construct the valuation measure, we standardized the Likert-scale and willingness to pay (WTP) measures for each of the three item pairs. For the WTP scores, we removed outliers that were more than 4 standard deviations from the mean. A reliability analysis indicated that the measures across the three item pairs formed a reliable scale ($\alpha = 0.90$), so we created a single composite measure of value across all of the items. The social exclusion items ($\alpha = 0.93$), the need for belonging scale ($\alpha = 0.85$), and positive ($\alpha = 0.91$) and negative ($\alpha = 0.91$) subsets of the PANAS were also reliable, and each of the scales were collapsed into a single measure.

2.2. Results

Eleven participants failed the attention check and were dropped from the analysis. The results, however, were the same when those participants were included.

We conducted a 2 (social exclusion vs. social inclusion) \times 2 (order of manipulation check, before vs. after main DV) between-subjects ANOVA on the valuation measure. As predicted, this analysis revealed a significant main effect of social rejection, $F(1, 132) = 5.53$, $p = 0.020$, $d = 0.41$, with socially excluded participants reporting higher valuation of the contagion items ($M = 0.12$, $SD = 0.62$) than socially included participants ($M = -0.13$, $SD = 0.61$) (see Fig. 1). Neither the main effect of order nor the interaction between order and condition were significant.

We analyzed the social rejection items as well as the NBS-10 using analogous ANOVAs. Participants who were excluded in the Cyberball game reported significantly higher levels of social rejection ($M = 7.55$, $SD = 1.61$) than participants who were included ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.48$), $F(1, 132) = 276.30$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 2.86$. Exclusion in the Cyberball game also had a significant effect on the need

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