Making Magic: Fetishes in Contemporary Consumption

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Fetishes—magical objects of extraordinary empowerment and influence—are often sought by consumers for their value as usable objects. Our interpretive research extends the current static perspective of fetishes by proposing a dynamic cyclical model of fetishization appropriate to an age of mass production. Consumers use contagious and imitative magic to imbue replica instruments with power. Semiotically signified magical thinking causes replicas to radiate aura and thus transforms them into fetishes. We suggest that although all replicas with aura become fetishes, the cyclical fetishization process is only perpetuated when empowerment is public, sustained, and authentic.

Jack (WM58, engineer): If I could have any guitar in the world? I wouldn’t mind having his [Roger McGuinn’s] guitar. Oh well, it’s at the Experience Music Project [EMP Museum in Seattle].

Researcher: But, it might be beat up, it might be scratched?

Jack: It was there; it cut the hits at the moment of creation of ‘the sound.’ But, anyhow, that is something that is enshrined in a museum. . . . I’ve stood in front of it at the EMP in its glory. . . . I got the chills.

[After using another material object that is owned by the same consumer:]

Jack: I play this guitar and God. . . . I sound just like Roger! It’s quite a magical feeling. . . . and part of it is the magic of this particular instrument. Truly. It’s a magical instrument. And when I play it, it takes me to places that I couldn’t go without it.

The remarks in the epigraph are one contemporary consumer’s reflections about two distinct but related material objects. The first is a famous rock star’s personal instrument or relic, and the second is a replica (close copy) of the first that is owned and used by this ordinary consumer. This consumer can be viewed as referring to each distinct object as a fetish—a magical object of extraordinary empowerment and influence.

Prior consumer research (Belk 1991, 1995, 2001) on fetish objects has considered the first example of a fetish—a relic-fetish like a rock star’s personal instrument or a warrior’s battle shield (Ellen 1988, 1990). This prior research discusses objects that are taken out of ordinary use, enshrined in public or private collections, and displayed for their exhibition value. However, consumer researchers have not yet examined the phenomenon illustrated in the second example: the replica-fetish that a consumer like Jack uses because it offers the promise of magical meaning that he believes alters his state of being (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003). Such fetish objects remain underexamined in the consumer behavior literature, despite the pervasive use of professor at the University of Auckland. The authors gratefully acknowledge their informants who opened up their lives, their instruments, and their passions to make this research possible. In addition, the authors thank Rob Kozinets, Cristel Russell, and Hope Schau for helpfully commenting on an earlier version of this article and acknowledge the editor, associate editor, and three anonymous reviewers for their constructive suggestions.

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mass-produced fetish objects in a variety of arenas, such as sports fields, fishing or hunting grounds, and recordings or stage performances, to name just a few. Mick’s (2003) editorial called for research on fetishes, categorizing this concept with other underresearched, deeply rooted human motivations such as dreams, desires, and hopes. Consequently, our research responds by presenting a more fluid cyclical process of fetishization appropriate to considering the contemporary consumption of replica-fetishes.

Replicas can be individually crafted or mass produced. Anthropologist Roy Ellen (1988) studied fetishized shields individually crafted and used by the primitive Nuaulu tribe of Indonesia. We, in contrast, examine how contemporary consumers use magical thinking (the attribution of meaningful connections to correlational actions, events, and/or objects) to transform mass-produced replicas into fetishes. In contradiction to Benjamin (1936/1968), who argued that mass-produced replicas lack aura and so are no more than mere shadows of originals, we show how replicas can and do acquire aura, or charisma (Björkman 2002). We rely on Belk’s characterization of fetishes as “magical objects” (1991, 28) with “magical power” (2001, 61) and “magical aura” (1996, 81) to suggest that consumers’ magical thinking imbues mass-produced replicas with power, causing these replicas to radiate aura and thus transforming them into fetishes.

More specifically, we extend existing consumer research on fetishism by addressing three research questions. First, we ask, how does a replica become perceived as accruing power? To answer this, we extend current consumer research on contagious magic by unpacking the processes by which consumers use contagious magic and imitative magic (separately and together) to imbue their replicas with perceptions of power. Magic, and the magical thinking that produces it, is often tangibilized. This is because magic is abstract and thus may be more easily recalled and employed if represented in a more concrete manner. Just as the possessions one is most emotionally attached to (Belk 1988) create and express identity to self and others, objectified magical thinking both creates magical power and signifies that magical power to self and others. So, our second question asks, how do consumers make power tangible in their replicas so that these replicas become perceived as radiating aura? Our answer contributes by extending current research on how consumers decode existing semiotic cues to examine how consumers create and employ these cues to signify the results of their magical thinking in their replicas. Third, we ask, how do these replicas subsequently empower their possessors such that the replicas become desired by others? Because we situate our research within the context of mass-produced objects, our article extends consumer research on fetishes by proffering a cyclical model of contemporary fetishization that fundamentally redefines the static view evident in previous research.

We next review the relevant literatures that inform our work, calling attention to the limitations in these streams of research that gave rise to our aforementioned questions. Following our review, we report our empirical findings and discuss their meaning for consumer research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

We now present the theoretical underpinnings of our work. First, we review the perspective of fetishes that is evident in prior consumer research. Next, we discuss magical thinking and explain how we believe that it can be semiotically signified. Finally, we discuss how fetishes might attain aura and agency and thus extend self.

Fetishes in Prior Consumer Research

Fetishes are found in both premodern and contemporary cultures (Belk 1991; Gmelch 2008). According to Ellen (1988), the term “fetish” is etymologically rooted in the Latin facticius, meaning “to do” or in the passive “a thing made by art.” The term was initially utilized by anthropologists and historians of religion to shed light on the relationships between people in traditional societies and material objects. This anthropological view of fetishes contributed the idea that material objects can be inferred as having the power to cause or alter events (Dant 1996) and is inherent in Belk’s (1991) discussion of protective charms or talismans such as amulets (Bastien 1982) and hex signs (Rook 1987). Subsequently, Karl Marx, observing that people in modern capitalist societies also imbued material objects with mystical powers, used the term to refer to commodity fetishism, the belief that value is inherent in the commodities themselves instead of being added to them by human labor (Baudrillard 1981/1994). The Marxist view contributed the idea that a manufactured object can contain power greater than the power of ordinary humans and that it can confer that special power to its possessor. This perspective of fetishes is implicit in Belk and Wallendorf (1990)’s exposition of the sacred meanings of money. Sigmund Freud then developed the concept of sexual fetishism, where an inanimate object, or a body part, becomes an object that engenders sexual arousal (Schroeder and Borgerson 2003). This “psycho-sexual” perspective of fetishes relies on the idea that the part can metonymically stand for the whole. Another example where a part metonymically represents the whole is that of a relic of a saint. Such relics were believed to contain the entire power of the saint (Geary 1986). Geary (1986, 1990) discussed how these relics were fetishized for their cult value, meaning that they were hidden away and brought out periodically to be revered for their spiritual power. The metonymic power of fetishes has been discussed in the context of visual consumption and advertising (e.g., Otnes and Scott 1996; Schroeder 2002; Schroeder and Borgerson 2003).

According to Belk (1991, 38), Ellen (1988) synthesized the three overlapping perspectives of fetishes to “outline four underlying cognitive elements” common to all views of fetishes, namely, concretization, animation, conflation, and ambiguity of control. Concretization involves representing an abstract concept in material form. For example,
concretization occurs when the sport of baseball is represented as a material object such as a first baseman’s glove or mitt (Gmelch 2008). Animation involves projecting animate characteristics onto objects, thus permitting them to be more easily animated—such as treating a baseball glove analogously to a human being by naming it and conversing with it. This results in humans’ relationships with fetishes resembling relationships with other humans, as opposed to relationships with things. Conflation involves merging the concrete signifying object with the abstract idea it signifies. When conflation occurs, the glove is viewed as the essence of baseball itself and becomes a causative agent. The fourth element, ambiguity of control, arises from the increasingly ambiguous power relationship between owner and possession. It becomes somewhat unclear if the owner of the glove achieves success at first base because of the owner’s ability or because of the fetishized glove.

Ellen refers to concretization, animation, conflation, and ambiguity of control as “a logical sequence” (1988, 230). Ellen’s view of fetishism—based on his observations of existing fetishized artisan-created shields—may be appropriate for a post-hoc examination of singular objects that have already been fetishized. Ellen observed shields that were old enough to be relics of guerilla battles in 1950 and consequently viewed by the Nuaulu to be “unpierceable by arrow or bullet, transmitting their power to righteous users” (Ellen 1990, 11). However, Ellen’s view of fetishism is inherently a static set of cognitive elements and does not explain how mass-produced objects are fetishized, how aura is created, or how established fetishes can be further replicated. Yet, contemporary consumers continue to desire and acquire reissued new replicas of revered mass-produced items (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003). This suggests that a contemporary theory of fetishism is needed to explain how mass-produced replicas of fetishes can become fetishized, accrue aura, and then subsequently be replicated for others to fetishize.

Signifying Magical Thinking

Like fetishes, magical thinking continues to be evident in contemporary culture (Belk 1991; Gmelch 2008; Rozin, Millman, and Nemeroff 1986). We draw on Damisch, Stoberock, and Mussweiler’s (1977) definition of superstition and Shweder’s (1977) discussion of magical thinking to define magical thinking as the attribution of meaningful connections to correlated actions/events and/or objects. For example, a baseball player may believe that wearing a jersey used in a previous successful game may guarantee a home run in future games (Gmelch 2008). The correlation between wearing the jersey and the successful game is interpreted as the jersey causing the successful game in the past and as imbuing the jersey with the ability to cause successful games in the future.

Magical thinking is considered to be universal (Nemeroff and Rozin 1992; Shweder 1977), is relatively abstract, and may even be subconscious. Consequently, tangible evidence of magical thinking serves to signify that it has occurred and continues to operate. Just as power imbues people or objects with aura (which then signifies that power), consumers can utilize magical thinking to imbue objects with cues that then signify that magical thinking has occurred. To use Ellen’s (1988) terminology, semiotic cues in the object concretize magical thinking.

Although alternate semiotic paradigms do exist (Mick 1986), for two reasons we utilize a Peircean semiotics lens to explicate how consumers’ magical thinking is signified. First, our choice is consistent with Mick et al. (2004)’s conclusion that the Peircean paradigm of semiotics is most appropriate when focusing on explicating signs and consumer meaning processes. Second, because Peirce devoted considerable attention to how humans discern what is truth and what is real (Grayson and Martinec 2004), his work is a useful basis for exploring how consumers create and consume replicas of an original admired object. Peirce (1940) most often discussed three main categories of signs: indices, icons, and symbols (Mick 1986). Grayson and Martinec (2004) define icons (or more precisely, iconic cues) as physical similarities to the original and indices (or indexical cues) as contiguous, factual spatio-temporal links to the original. Symbols—conventional signs that are widely understood among members of a shared culture—are used to describe all signs that are not indexical or iconic. We next describe Frazer’s (1890/1959) two laws of magical thinking and explain how we believe they can be tangibilized by iconic and indexical signs.

**Tangibilizing Imitative Magic.** Frazer’s “law of similarity,” which holds that “things that resemble one another share fundamental properties” (Rozin et al. 1986, 703) is often referred to as imitative magic. Images (whether a visual representation or a manufactured replica) can exhibit qualities that are inherent in the original prototype. Because of these shared qualities, the image may be conflated (merged or confused) with the object it resembles. Conflation results in the image producing the object itself, which is another example of magical thinking that is used effectively in advertising (Schroeder and Borgerson 2003).

Aggarwal and McGill (2007) found that consumer anthropomorphization of products is facilitated by product features congruent with a human schema—suggesting to us that the more similar a replica is to the original prototype, the more easily it can be viewed as being equivalent to the prototype. Consequently, in our view, replicas that exhibit iconic links to the original prototype tangibilize the operation of imitative magic. The law of similarity operates via the form of magical thinking whereby “like produces like.” If the effect of this magical thinking is strong enough, it produces another form of magical thinking whereby “image produces the object itself” (the conflation of object and image).

Tangible representations of (magical or sacred) power often become viewed as being the very power thus represented. For example, in Hindu religion, iconic representations of deities are ritually animated and then become viewed as vessels that literally contain the relevant deities (Davis 1997). The human tendency to treat an iconic representation as if it is the entity it represents is so strong that Islamic culture prohibits iconically representing the sacred
in a realistic manner to prevent the representation from becoming an object of devotion (Allen 1986). However, iconic representations appear to be more easily conflated with the original prototype when they include indexical links to the prototype as well. For example, popular culture has depicted voodoo magic as utilizing an iconic representation of a human imbued with an indexical hair or fingernail. So, next, we discuss how indexical linkages can be created.

**Tangibilizing Contagious Magic.** Frazer’s second law, the “law of contagion,” holds that people/objects that come in physical contact with other people/objects can become permanently influenced through the transfer of some or all of their properties or “essence” from one to the other (Argo, Dahl, and Morales 2006; Nemeroff and Rozin 1994). This law, which is often referred to as contagious magic, explains the transfer mechanism underlying contamination (Belk 1988), which is the perception that qualities of one entity have been transferred to another, due to perceptions that actual physical contact between two entities (e.g., consumer and product) has occurred. Contamination can be viewed positively (Argo et al. 2008; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989) or negatively (Argo et al. 2006), depending on the perceived valence of the contaminating agent (Mishra 2009). Morales and Fitzsimons (2007) found that perceived (as opposed to actual) physical contact was sufficient to create negative contagion effects that persisted over time and suggested visualization was key to the transfer of properties from contagious agent to the target object. Since contagion (and its corollary, contamination) is perceived to occur if the contaminating agent is perceived to have been in spatial contact with the target (Argo et al. 2006), indexical cues are evidence that the law of contagion has literally and figuratively worked its magic. This suggests to us that replicas exhibiting indexical cues to a star performer or his relic-instrument serve as a tangible visual reminder that the law of contagion has operated. Although the law of contagion operates via the form of magical thinking whereby “contact produces contagion,” it also utilizes the property of metonymy (“the part is seen to be the same as the whole”) since contact with part of the originating entity is sufficient for a transfer of essence.

Indexical cues, being evidence of factual contiguity, are tangible confirmation that the replica has been in contact with the original object of interest. Since contagious magic requires physical contact, indexical cues can signify that magical thinking based on perceptions of contagion (i.e., contagious magic) has occurred. Relics, one particular category of indexically signed objects, are objects that were part of, or that have been in close contact with, a revered person believed to possess extraordinary power (e.g., a saint). Such power extends to first-order relics (parts of physical remains of saints), second-order relics (personal possessions of saints), and third-order relics or brandea (items that have come into physical contact with first-order relics) and persists after the saint’s death (Twitchell 2004).

**The Research Opportunity.** Although imitative magic may be practiced independently of contagious magic, contagious magic generally involves an application of imitative magic (Frazer 1890/1959). As our review shows, while consumer research has started examining contagious magic, the extant work has not yet explicitly examined the influence of imitative magic nor has it examined if and how the laws of contagion and similarity operate in an integrative manner. Furthermore, Grayson and Martinec (2004) empirically demonstrated that iconic cues and indexical cues are distinct and can independently influence perceptions of authenticity. Because their work stopped short of fully examining the interaction between iconic and indexical cues, they called for future research examining the potential trade-offs between iconic and indexical cues. Consequently, we contribute by examining how contemporary consumers signify their magical thinking in their replicas with both iconic and indexical cues. Consequently, we contribute by examining how contemporary consumers signify their magical thinking in their replicas with both iconic and indexical cues to shed light on how these cues may be used in tandem (and sometimes traded off) to imbue their replicas with aura.

**Aura, Agency, and the Extended Self**

Björkman (2002) refers to aura as charisma, which is the perceived magnetism of a person or object due to its empowerment and ability to influence. Thus, the power and influence viewed as inherent in the material object causes a perception that it radiates aura. In our view, this implies that aura signifies power. Benjamin (1936/1968) contends that since a replica is without the places and rituals of the original, it lacks aura. So we ask, how can aura be created? Is it created by the fetish object, its possessor, or both?

Previous research on fetishes, in focusing on the quest for empowerment from a material object (Ellen 1988; Geary 1986, 1990) viewed the empowering object as having agency in its own right. However, Belk et al.’s (2003, 348) observation that “the consumer . . . has a role in constructing the object of desire” suggests that consumers play a critical role in creating the very object they crave. Moreover, in their insightful discussion of how family practices help create the agency of a singularized object, Epp and Price (2010) portray consumers as active creators of their destinies. Building on these observations, we postulate that the transformative agency consumers seek is not a quality that resides fully in the consumer or purely in the sought object, but instead a quality that is created by the relationship between the consumer and the object (Borgerson 2005).

Since fetishes are perceived as empowering, consumers can use fetishized possessions to enhance their sense of self. The extended self, which was conceptualized by Belk (1988), consists of the possessions a consumer is most emotionally attached to, and it is a concrete representation of the abstract self to oneself and to others. Consequently, the extended self creates and expresses identity. In addition, we contend that the extended self can shed light on consumer-object agency. Belk’s (1988) view of the extended self implies that one projects oneself outward to extend self onto a possession, consequently controlling and dominating that possession in an imperialistic manner. In our opinion, that view of extended self implies that the consumer, rather than the object, is the locus of agency. Belk acknowledges that this “superficially masculine and Western view” (1988, 140) of extended self...
may be limited, and he calls for an exploration of alternate, non-Western conceptualizations of self (Belk 2005). In answer to his call, we offer a more assimilationist conceptualization of self incorporation that is appropriate for consumers seeking to become like those they adore, such as star athletes or musicians.

Belk (1988) notes that a self-extension can extend self instrumentally, as when a tool allows us to do something we would not otherwise be able to do and/or extend self symbolically, as when a uniform allows us to become more than we otherwise would be. Belk’s original Western conceptualization of self as extending outward to dominate the possession is appropriate to understanding how a possession can instrumentally extend self, as when a better quality and more supple glove offers improved functionality allowing a first baseman to catch better than before. Our alternative conceptualization of self-enhancement captures an incorporating or assimilating of a possession inward into self. From this perspective, novices are viewed as incorporating an extension of another’s more accomplished self in an assimilationist manner in order to enhance self (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982). This view would imply that the locus of agency arises from the object. Thus, the concept of extended self is also germane to the question of consumer-object agency when considering the creation of aura.

EMPIRICAL ACTIVITY

Our data consist of 23 videotaped depth interviews with 16 male informants (three informants were interviewed three or four times each) who ranged in age from 22 to 63. Half the informants were interviewed in North America and half in Australasia. All but two informants were obtained from our interpersonal networks, fortuitous encounters, or subsequent snowball sampling. The other two, internationally known retailers of musical instruments in the United States and Australasia, respectively, were personally approached by both authors and asked to participate. Although we did not deliberately exclude women from our sample, all guitar players we encountered were male. All our informants had played and owned more than one guitar. These interviews were completed over 4 years, and they include interviews with a star performer, rising stars, working professionals, and amateur and recreational guitarists. Fourteen of our 16 informants were Caucasian, while the remaining two were Asian Indians.

Our bi-gender, bicultural research team personally conducted 18 depth interviews, with both interviewers being present for 10 of these. A graduate student with depth interviewing experience was further trained by both authors and employed to conduct a further five interviews with younger guitarists who would have been otherwise difficult to reach. All interviewers are guitarists, which established quick rapport with informants and facilitated an understanding of the informants’ lived experiences. One author has an extensive knowledge of rock and roll and electric guitars, while the other has no such specialized knowledge. The diversity of our backgrounds allowed us to benefit from both familiarity and naïveté simultaneously. Interviews were conducted at a location of the informant’s choosing, most often his home. Because all the interviews were videotaped, both authors were able to assess interviewer quality and observe the interactions of the informants with their guitars, even for the interviews they did not personally conduct. After each interview was completed and the videotape was (re)viewed, the relevant interviewer was peer debriefed.

The videotapes were transcribed, resulting in approximately 700 single-spaced pages of transcripts, which, together with the original videos, photographs, and field notes, formed our empirical data. Informants’ names and other identifying information in this article have been disguised. We employed the constant comparative method of analysis, engaging in open-ended and axial coding (Spiggle 1994) of interview transcripts and field notes. Throughout the research period of 4 years, we also engaged in participant observation of live performances of star performers, aspiring performers, cover artists, and tribute bands, and we observed the presentation and audience viewing of music-related memorabilia in museums. These observations, together with the relevant literature, informed our interpretations of our data.

FINDINGS

The contemporary cycle of fetishization in figure 1 depicts how consumers utilize magical thinking to desire, cocreate, consume, and subsequently replicate fetishes from replicas. We use the sequential phases of our model to organize and present our findings. To simplify our exposition, we structure our model as consisting of discrete, sequential steps. However, as we discuss our model, we will explain how these steps are actually parts of processes that can and do overlap with each other. In particular, the transfer process (the use of magical thinking to transfer power to replicas) and the tangibilization process (the use of iconic and indexical links to signify magical thinking in replicas) occur simultaneously, and they are mutually reinforcing. Similarly, the processes of empowerment and ambiguity of control occur over the same period of time, and they mutually reinforce each other. These and the other ways in which our cyclical model of fetishization extends Ellen’s (1988) linear characterization are summarized in table 1.

Desiring a Relic-Fetish

We asked our informants to assume they had a choice between an old, “beat up” guitar that their most admired star performer had owned and played and a perfect example of that identical guitar when it was new—and each and every one unequivocally chose the old, used possession. For example, aspiring performer Artie [WM24, unemployed punk rock musician] explained, if he could have any guitar in the world, he would want “the one Billy Corgan [lead guitarist of the Smashing Pumpkins] played . . . maybe his genes rubbed off on the fingerboard [of the guitar] and I might pick them up a bit? . . . I don’t know, just because it was
his,” Artie’s comment indicates that Artie believes that Billy Corgan’s personal guitar has the power to improve Artie’s own performance. Artie’s speculation that he could become contaminated with Corgan’s essence via the intermediary of Corgan’s guitar suggests that Artie views that the essence of Corgan’s “star power” as having been transferred to Corgan’s guitar and that further transference to Artie may take place. Artie’s belief is based on contagious magic—because he believes that Corgan’s guitar is permanently influenced by its prior contact with Corgan and could, in turn, influence its next owner. Corgan’s guitar, having been personally played and contaminated by Corgan is a relic of Corgan’s. More importantly, to Artie, it is an existing fetish that Artie desires because he perceives it as having the power to help him to perform better.

The vast amounts paid for relic guitars of legendary musicians (Bacon 2008) corroborates our contention that an admired star performer’s original relic guitar, indexical to the emulated star performer—and believed to be charged with the essence of the legend—is the most preferred form of fetish. However, due to the scarcity of such guitars, few consumers actually possess these relics. Even Mike [WM59], an internationally known retailer of musical instruments with considerable financial means, does not possess a verifiable relic instrument. Even Mike [WM59], an internationally known retailer of musical instruments with considerable financial means, does not possess a verifiable relic instrument. He has already spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on replicas of the Beatles’ gear and other items iconically and/or indexically linked to the Beatles (e.g., a Beatles lunchbox and a concert program autographed by all four Beatles). However, what he really desires are the original instruments that the Beatles used. Not satisfied with mere replicas, Mike regularly visits used instrument dealers in European cities in search of Beatles relics. In the meantime, he has settled for a vintage instrument that plausibly could have been played by a member of the Beatles. This is a Gibson guitar like the one held by George Harrison in a famous photograph of the Beatles taken in Hamburg in 1962. This beat-up Gibson is in a cracked leather case with a “Star Club” stencil, and Mike has the receipt for the purchase of the guitar in 1962 from the manager of the Liverpool band the Undertakers. As both the Undertakers and the Beatles had played in the Star Club in Hamburg in 1962, this guitar has verifiable spatio-temporal contiguity with the Beatles, and it might conceivably have been the one played and held by George Harrison. Mike told the interviewer, “you know, there’s anecdotal evidence that that’s been played by George Harrison and the receipt said that it was bought in Liverpool.” However, Harry [Mike’s employee and fellow band member] later clarified that, “well, Mike believes that it has been in the hands of George Harrison. But we can’t prove that though. It’s always going to be fantasy land—really. But he believes it. It certainly looks the part.” Harry’s comments suggest to us that he perceived Mike as engaging in a willing suspension of disbelief (Coleridge 1817/1975) facilitated by his
TABLE 1

COMPARISON TO PRIOR VIEWS OF FETISHES IN CONSUMER RESEARCH

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<tr>
<td>Concretization—representing an abstract concept as a material object</td>
<td>Money representing power (Belk and Wallendorf 1990)</td>
<td>1. Concretization can continue over time, e.g., the material object becomes increasingly specific as knowledge and experience accrue making conflation more likely</td>
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<tr>
<td>Animation—projecting animate characteristics onto a material object</td>
<td>Pets treated like persons (Wallendorf et al. 1988)</td>
<td>2. Iconic and indexical signs signify magical thinking and make it concrete</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conflation—merging the material object with the abstract concept it represents</td>
<td>Perceiving personal possessions as equivalent to their previous owners (Geary 1986; O’Guinn 1991)</td>
<td>1. Animation (becoming alive) precedes personification (acquiring a personality) in a continuous process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguity of control—locus of control/power between person and fetish-object becomes unclear</td>
<td>Collectors unsure if they control collected objects or vice versa (Belk 2001)</td>
<td>2. Cross-contamination leads to emotional attachment and assimilation into extended self</td>
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Obtaining a Replica

Not all replicas have the same potential to become fetishes. Our informants told us that, in seeking objects that might become fetishes, they looked for replicas with specific properties—that is, objects with the best possible iconic and indexical links to the admired original instrument. The specificity with which ideal attainable replicas were visualized was influenced by our informants’ familiarity with the product category at the moment of revelation, and it evolved over time as their familiarity grew. For example, we learned that Mike’s witnessing of his first Beatles performance was a revelation that resulted in a desire for the instruments comparable to those used in that performance. Mike (WM59) told us:

“I was 13 years old when I turned the TV on and I saw four guys [the Beatles] that turned my life from black and white into something color and I said: ‘That’s what I’m going to do. . . . I wanted to be a rock star! . . . England from post-war right through the fifties was very hard times for most people in England post-war. And in Liverpool and East London . . . it was not wonderful. . . . They [The Beatles] started a whole movement, not just music, but a whole movement, the whole modern era, if you like, and made young people think, start to think more rebellious, and thinking to not be like their parents. . . . The next thing I wanted for that Christmas was that guitar, and my sister bought me one. . . . I took it to bed with me, that was it, it was just the whole revolution for me. . . . I wasn’t alone, we felt the same thing, we all did the same thing, we all went out and bought a guitar!’

We note that although Mike said that his younger self wanted “that guitar” [emphasis added] he was satisfied with the gift of what was [he later clarified] a cheap acoustic guitar. Mike’s comments reveal his concretization of an abstract concept (“revolution”) into a concrete type of material object (“a guitar”). Thus, the young impoverished Mike’s desire for the relatively abstract idea of the “whole modern era” coalesced into his desire for the relatively more concrete...
“guitar.” This concretization of the abstract is Ellen’s (1988) first characteristic of a fetish. As our next excerpt demonstrates, the specificity with which an abstract idea is concretized is a critical determinant of how precisely the desired replica is envisaged.

Although Mike experienced his epiphany in the United Kingdom, Jack (WM58, an engineer) experienced a similar revelation in the Midwestern United States around the same time. Like Mike, Jack also vividly recalled his first experience of a Beatles’s performance on television:

I remember that February of 1964 and prior to that, it was folk music and lousy Tin Pan Alley [music], sappy stuff. And poor! The world changed . . . when the Beatles hit in 1964 all of a sudden, everybody wanted to do that, and everybody wanted an electric guitar. I mean the truth is, if the Beatles had showed up and they were playing trumpets, I mean, I would probably have a collection of trumpets here [pointing to his own collection of electric guitars]. . . . I mean, it was just a really galvanizing thing because I think it was easy for us guys to, at one level, recognize that—hey—these four guys up there . . . this is not coming out of some big pop music machine. I mean, this is a grassroots phenomenon. And they’re doing it by themselves, and gee!! Maybe we can do that, too? . . . I think a lot of people like us thought “I could do that!” and so a lot of . . . guitars were sold! . . . But this was not something that was passive—it was something that was aspirational. It was something that required skill. It was something that required practice.

Mike and Jack are part of a cohort of baby boomers who share a collective memory of the Beatles’s debut performance. Jack’s memory of the Beatles on The Ed Sullivan Show is seared into his mind because of his experience of the emotional power of the event. The stronger the emotion, the deeper the imprinting (Lorenz 1951). Jack’s comments also reveal that his concretization of rock and roll stardom into guitars at the moment of imprinting was more specific than the concretization experienced by Mike. In Jack’s case, the abstract concept of stardom was made concrete in a specific type of guitar, that is, electric guitars. Given that later probing revealed that Jack was taking classical guitar lessons at the time, we speculate that his relatively greater experience with, and knowledge of, guitars led him to a more detailed concretization than Mike’s. More importantly, the impact of this revelatory performance combined with Jack’s experience of guitar lessons meant that Jack wanted to do more than passively own an electric guitar; he wanted to actively play one.

Around the same time, a third baby boomer, Joey, also concretized stardom into a guitar. However, as the excerpt below demonstrates, Joey’s desired guitar was even more specific than Jack’s. Joey, already performing in the local music scene, was even more musically experienced and knowledgeable than Jack at the time. So, he concretized abstract stardom not just into the product category of electric guitars but into a very specific make and model of guitar.

This is my 1969 [Gibson] Les Paul Gold Top—the first really good guitar I ever had—it’s taken me around the world. I bought “Goldie” brand new at Guitar Heaven [after I] scrimped and saved money from gigs and went down there with $450 . . . and picked this one out and it was like the kind of guitar that you put it in your hands and it plays itself. I just knew it was the right one. . . . I [had] looked at my Rolling Stone books and saw that a 1959 [Les Paul] Gibson is what Keith Richards played a lot. Those 1959 Les Paul guitars are like the Holy Grail! . . . I just knew it was the right guitar for me [because it is] pretty much a really good reproduction of the way the Les Pauls were in the 50s and this was the first time they reissued them. . . . So it represented success, you know, real musicians. This was the unattainable, what you reached for . . . the star power it represented. . . . It’s a very special guitar and whenever I bring it out on-stage now I feel like I’m nineteen again,. suddenly I’m the kid . . . on stage opening up for Led Zeppelin with this guitar. (Joey, WM59, successful rock star)

As the excerpt demonstrates, Joey’s perception of Keith Richards as having extraordinary performance power imbued both Richards and Richard’s relic-instrument with aura. However, Joey went beyond admiring an unattainable relic to desiring a replica of it to use in his personal pursuit of stardom. So Joey’s greater knowledge and experience led to greater specificity of desired instrument—and to a more lofty dream.

Our fourth and final example of replicas discusses signature guitars. A year after his first experience of the Beatles, the young Jack was enraptured by a radio performance of “Mr. Tambourine Man” by Roger McGuinn of the Byrds. Jack’s admiration of Roger McGuinn continued unabated, and 2 decades later, he used his first employment bonus to acquire a close replica (the second instrument mentioned in our epigraph) of the unique instrument played by Roger McGuinn (the first instrument mentioned in our epigraph). The instrument Jack purchased is the type of replica termed a “signature guitar” because it is not just a close-as-possible copy of McGuinn’s original instrument—it also includes a reproduction of the original artist’s signature on its pick guard. As the data in the second part of our opening epigraph suggest, this means that Jack had concretized McGuinn’s star power into an even more specific replica than the examples already discussed. The adult Jack, now a past teen-aged winner of his city’s Battle of the Bands competition, desired and acquired a replica with the specific make, model, and even color of McGuinn’s instrument.

We have used three different baby boomers to illustrate how concretization can become increasingly specific for consumers with more experience and knowledge of the product class. However, our data also shows that after the initial...
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concretization, individual consumers can also demand increasingly specific guitars as their knowledge, experience, and financial means increase. Drew (WM 23) explained how he went from wanting any guitar to wanting a signature guitar.

Drew’s reference to the Joe Satriani Signature Guitar as a “Joe Satriani” supports our contention that a signature guitar, bearing as many iconic links as possible to the admired performer’s personal instrument, is particularly easy to conflate with the original instrument it replicates.

_Drew_: When I first started playing the guitar I played acoustic . . . but then I got a bit bored with it, so I bought my first electric guitar . . . the cheapest! See, I didn’t know what the hell I was doing at that point, I just thought all these electrics are the same, I didn’t know enough about them . . . [then] I started to realize there are better guitars out there so then I bought an Ibanez RG370, and I played that for a while, and now I am thinking about buying another one . . . the Joe Satriani custom guitar.

_Interviewer_: Would that be custom made for you?

_Drew_: Oh no, it’s a Joe Satriani. He [pointing to a magazine cover depicting guitarist Joe Satriani holding a signature guitar] is holding a Joe Satriani there. Basically he made his own guitar to his own specifications and then under the name of Ibanez who made it for him. . . . I went from not knowing anything, and now I realize that everything makes the guitar sound the way it does.

Ellen (1988) treats concretization as occurring at the start of the fetishization process. As shown in the preceding discussion, we contribute beyond Ellen by clarifying that concretization can occur in forms that vary from extremely vague to extremely specific, depending on the knowledge and experience of the consumer at the time of concretization. Moreover, concretization is not static, and as further consumer knowledge and experience accumulate, the specificity with which concretization occurs increases accordingly. We also demonstrate that iconic and indexical cues, in signifying imitative and contagious magic, concretize magical thinking. Finally, we note that the specificity with which the relic-fetish is concretized in the replica-fetish is important because increasing specificity increases the ease with which relic and replica are eventually conflated or merged.

Creating the Best Possible Replica

Next, we will discuss how consumers create replicas with the best possible iconic and indexical links to a revered relic.

Creating Iconic Links. Jack told us he was able to functionally replicate the sound of Roger McGuinn’s original instrument because his replica had the same functional attributes as the original. He said:

_They did a [factory] reissue of the guitars [in the 1980s of what] they made in the 60s. . . . It has a very distinct sound—like no other instrument. And it just faithfully, in an eerie manner, recreates the sound of “Mr. Tambourine Man . . . the jingle-jangle twelve-string sound of The Byrds. And, so, sonically it’s perfect and visually, I mean, it is a perfect copy of what Rickenbacker custom-made for McGuinn in the 1960s.

However, Jack’s comment about similarity hints at another reason for desiring a perfect sonic and visual replica of the original instrument—magical thinking. As Jack went on to tell us about his experiences playing his replica of McGuinn’s instrument, he explained how he worked.

_Jack_: [I would] have the stereo in the other room, you know, I put some Byrds song on . . . [like] Mr. Tambourine Man . . . and I’ll just switch off the channel Roger McGuinn’s guitar is on . . .

_Interviewer_: So you can do that.

_Jack_: Yeah, yeah. I mean, fortunately on those recordings you can. This instrument is just in one channel, and so I can play that part.

_Interviewer_: So you switch off Roger McGuinn’s guitar and then you play your guitar?

_Jack_: Right. And wow . . . it sounds, you know. . . . You know, I sound just like him! And I tell you, it’s quite a magical feeling. You know, to blend in with this group whose music you love so much and you hold them in such high-esteem. You know, to be part of it.

Jack’s comments revealed that he was harnessing the law of imitative magic to infer that the replica, in resembling the relic, shares at least some of its properties. Thus the replica of McGuinn’s instrument allows Jack to sound “just like” McGuinn and in doing so magically transports him into McGuinn’s persona as lead guitarist of the Byrds.

Jack employed the most obvious route to obtaining a replica of the relic McGuinn guitar he coveted—he purchased the best possible replica available in the market that was within his means. This replica had the maximum number of physical similarities, or iconic links, to the original relic. More recently, he began playing bass guitar and desired a German-made, Hofner-brand, violin-model electric bass (the instrument played by his most admired bass player, Paul McCartney), which was out of his financial reach. He, however, purchased a cheaper made-in-China Hofner violin-styled bass, which he believed was visibly indistinguishable from the “real thing” to all but the most knowledgeable collectors. He told the interviewer:

_This [Chinese-made] Hofner was made in a way that the Hofner basses were made in the early ’60s [in Germany]. . . . Because they’re more violin-like they’re not as sturdy and there’s more of a vintage sound you know with this instrument. . . . But cosmetically there were two problems with this Chinese bass. The first was the knobs. Instead of
being white they were black, ok? It was easy for me to go on eBay by myself and buy a real set of German white knobs. And then . . . there was a plastic truss-rod plate that said “Beatles Icon.” So anyone can see that. So it was very easy for me to buy a piece of plastic for 5 bucks and so I fabricated a plate [without the words “Beatles Icon”] myself.

So Jack purchased a cheaper made-in-China replica from the market that had strong sonic and visual iconicity to the original but that did have two visual iconic disparities that he subsequently corrected. Thus, his replica ended up having two more iconic links (knobs and plate) to McCartney’s original relic in comparison to its state when originally bought.

Jack’s creativity in creating more iconic links for his replica demonstrates the relative proactiveness of contemporary consumers. This proactiveness was also shared by a younger, less financially secure informant, Artie (WM24, unemployed punk musician), who created his desired replica of his most admired guitar—Billy Corgan’s original relic. Since Artie was not able to fulfill his desire for Corgan’s relic guitar, or even purchase a manufactured signature Corgan guitar, he assembled an icon of Corgan’s purple Stratocaster guitar, as depicted in figure 2. Artie recollected how he did this in the following:

For my 14th birthday, I woke up and there was an electric guitar at the side of my bed. That guitar’s now like the “Smashing Pumpkins” guy’s [Billy Corgan’s] guitar. I kind of made it like a replica. . . . I bought these pick-ups [like the ones] Billy Corgan uses . . . one by one as I could afford them. . . . then one day I decided I’d spray paint it a silver-purple color and then I put on this nicer looking pick guard. . . . The pick guard I bought because it was similar to Billy Corgan’s and I was trying to make my guitar look like his. . . . And then, a few years later, I listened to a band called Blink-182 and I met them on the street, and I happened to have my guitar on me, so I got it signed by them . . . I sort of knew they . . . would be around 48th Street . . . [and] I got them to sign it.

As the excerpt above shows, Artie, like Jack, cocreated his desired replica with the assistance of products and services from the market and made his replica a closer visual copy of the relic he admired. Artie also went beyond Jack, to seek and imbue an indexical link to star performers Blink-182 into his replica. We turn next to a discussion of this and other evidence of consumers desiring the best possible indexical links in their replicas.

Creating Indexical Links. As mentioned earlier, the best available replica in the market is often a “signature guitar,” so-called because it usually includes a reproduction of the original artist’s signature on the pick guard. This

NOTE.—Color version available as online enhancement.
reproduced signature reduces the iconicity of the replication with respect to the original because the original usually does not have a signed pick guard. However, the reproduced signature provides an iconic representation of an indexical link to the original artist, since it is a copy of the original artist’s signature (which is a first-hand indexical link to the artist). Consequently, consumers seem willing to accept a reduction in iconicity in return for evidence of endorsement of the original artist in the form of a reproduction of his signature. This suggests to us that consumers may recognize that contagious magic as being more desirable than imitative magic, due to its greater scarcity and potency.

However, consumers are clear that, given the choice, they would prefer a first-hand original indexical link to their musical hero as opposed to an iconic copy of the indexical signature. For example, although Jack’s signature Roger McGuinn Rickenbacker was his most precious of several electric guitars, he later confided that his dream was to get McGuinn to sign a blank pick guard that he could then use to replace the pick guard that currently bore a copy of McGuinn’s signature. McGuinn’s original guitar, enshrined in a museum, is outside the market. And Jack was unable to obtain even a McGuinn Rickenbacker with a first-hand indexical link to McGuinn from the market (probably due to scarcity and/or cost). But he dreamed of cocreating such an instrument by getting McGuinn to sign a pick guard for him.

Artie (the young unemployed punk musician who created his own Billy Corgan replica) did not merely dream about getting a rock star to sign and hence imbue a first-hand indexical link into his replica. Although he did not have the opportunity to obtain a signature from Billy Corgan, we described earlier how he orchestrated a meeting with Blink-182 (another punk band he admired) and obtained their signatures on his instrument. Artie’s replica now simultaneously contains iconic and indexical properties relevant to his pursuit of becoming a star punk musician. This guitar’s iconicity to Corgan’s relic instrument allows it to transmit imitative magic to Artie. Furthermore, the Blink-182 signatures that bear evidence of its first-hand indexicality to members of this other admired band signify their contagious magic in his replica. Because of these joint iconic and indexical properties, Artie, the market, and the celebrity band Blink-182 have cocreated a guitar that is more potent a signifier than a merely iconic guitar. Artie’s cocreated possession however, is not maximally potent in signifying and transmitting Corgan’s star performer power because it was signed by Blink-182 instead of Corgan.

Such a more powerful replica was cocreated by Joey. Earlier, we described how he purchased “Goldie,” a mass-produced iconic 1969 replica of a 1959 instrument played by Keith Richards. Another legendary player, Duane Allman, also played a similar 1959 instrument (Bacon 2008). As the following reveals, Joey was soon able to imbue his replica with an indexical link to Allman by way of a second-order relic.

We’re out on tour for the first time; we’re on the road with Jimi Hendrix, Janice Joplin, Led Zeppelin, the Allman Brothers Band, and so many other greats. Duane Allman and I were backstage, and we’re trading licks on our guitars, and so then he’s changing his strings . . . and I picked up the strings he took off his guitar every night, rolled them up, and put them in my case and later on my guitar! The guitar just grew in my estimation.

This mutually reinforcing nature of the iconic and indexical cues made for a particularly potent replication of Duane’s instrument. Joey also reported intentionally allowing his belt buckle to make a mark on the guitar, every time he played it on stage, which is a process termed relic’ing—intentionally aging a guitar (Bacon 2008) to make it look like the vintage 1959 instruments played by the star performers he admired. He told us:

I love the soul of the finish, every chip, every crack, this greening—that’s all sweat. That’s the badge of courage of this guitar . . . Every belt mark was like a notch on the belt—I used to put my fuzz tone [sound effects pedal] in the case, with my guitar on top of the [protective] pouch so every time I got it out it had another nick on the neck—this was a relic before Fender started using the word relic—I wanted it to be beat up.

Joey’s method added “iconicity with old things” to make his 1969 replica seem more iconically authentic (Grayson and Martinec 2004, 301). It also imbued his replica with indexical cues that linked the replica to Joey’s self in the space and time of the tour with already established rock stars. Having discussed how aspiring performers imbue their replica instruments with the best possible iconic and indexical links, we now turn to a discussion of the final magical transformation that imbues their replicas with magical power and hence causes them to radiate aura.

**Animating and Personifying a Replica**

Our informants reported how once acquired a replica guitar becomes their favorite at the time and is played for hours daily. We found that the close contact the players have with their instruments transform these replicas in the eyes of their possessors. As Deepak (IM 22) put it, “you start to get attached to it and form an identity for it.” Animation (the attribution of the properties of living organisms to inanimate objects) is the second characteristic of fetishes noted by Ellen (1988). The collective anthropomorphization of guitars is clear from the human physiological nomenclature commonly used for the parts of a guitar, namely, head, neck, body, and waist. Moreover, when a material object is observed to behave as animated—for example, all informants said their guitars “sing” or “realy sings”—then that object can even be further regarded as animate.

The collective anthropomorphization of this general category of material objects (i.e., guitars) permits more elaborate individual animation of a specific replica to then develop in the mind of believers. This animation often feeds, and is subsequently fed by, acts of personification—actions that go beyond anthropomorphizing the guitar as generally human
to becoming akin to a uniquely singular human with a specific personality. Many of our informants personified their guitars by name and gender. For example, Deepak named his 12-string guitar “Rosie.” When asked why he referred to the guitar as a “she” and not a “Bruce or whatever,” he explained: “I don’t know. Umm, being that intimate with a male? Because in the end when you are writing your own songs, you are being pretty intimate with the music. . . . Because when you are playing, when you are writing something—that’s a bit of an expression of how you are feeling.” When Rosie was damaged by airline baggage handlers, and Deepak received an insurance settlement, he declined to replace “her.”

Other informants also personified their instruments through social roles such as confidant, companion, collaborator, wife, or muse. For example, Joey told us that after he purchased Goldie, “it did become a companion. I actually had it in every hotel room I’d go in [when the band was on tour]. It’d never stay with the equipment. I actually slept with it a couple of nights—that was the safest place [for the guitar]. I’d be writing a song and I’d fall asleep and it was right next to me. So we, we’re companions, and we became very close.” Joey’s comments—like Deepak’s—reflect an intimacy rich in emotional attachment to his companion. We do not claim that Deepak or Joey explicitly regard their guitars as living people; nonetheless, we believe their candid reports of their own behavior portray interactions similar to those between people and not the behaviors of people toward things. Moreover, we note that the sexual overtones of their comments are consistent with the sexualization of star performers (Schroeder 2002) in general and electric guitars in particular.

Ellen (1988) describes animation as the attribution of physiological and behavioral characteristics of living organisms to objects. Our examination of fetishization has revealed that in addition personality characteristics can be attributed to objects, resulting in their personification. We go beyond Ellen to note that while the inception of animation precedes the inception of personification, both processes continue over overlapping periods of time and are mutually reinforcing.

We have discussed how consumers have engaged in magickal thinking that has led them to engage in three sequential transformative processes. Imbuing a replica with the best available iconic links adds the power of the original relic instrument via imitative magic. Subsequently imbuing the replica with the best available indexical links adds to it additional power—the power of star performers via contagious magic. Finally, animating these replicas on the basis of imitative magic (by viewing things that have the properties of live beings as being alive) adds even more power (the power of self-determination) to the replica. These additions of power incrementally add aura to the replica and effect its final transformation into a fetish. However, this final transformative process of animation is actually also a first consequence of the consumer’s ongoing relationship with their replica—assimilating the replica-fetish into self.

Assimilating a Replica-Fetish into Self

The extensive amount of practice that our informants reported engaging in leads to prolonged physical contact between player and guitar. This prolonged contact facilitates an exchange of essence between player and instrument via the process of contamination (Belk 1988). The bonding between player and instrument creates the emotional attachment that is the critical attribute of objects that are part of the extended self (Belk 1988). When a guitar is first acquired, it is not yet a part of the extended self. We found that while mastery (which leads to knowing intimately) was the main process by which new instruments became part of the extended self, the process of extension into self gained additional complexity for used instruments. When a used instrument was acquired, the process of becoming part of the extended self also involved decontamination of the previous owner’s self and a recontamination with the current owner’s self. Joey explained:

You have to make every guitar your own, no matter what it is. . . . It’s like panning for gold. You start rubbing and polishing [the body of the guitar] and that finish [on the wood] really comes through. So I go through a ritual. . . . You strip it all down—you take off the strings, you take off the knobs, you take out the wax, and you just start buffing that thing. Getting all the last life off, and putting your life on it. After I buy a guitar it will probably be the only guitar I play for the next few months. I’m making it my own; it’s kind of a process of making it your own.

By stripping the guitar himself, and by doing so by hand (when he could have had his guitar technician do it), Joey is taking the first steps to decontaminating it of the essence of former player(s). When he proceeds to buff it, his rubbing and polishing activity recontaminates the guitar with his own psychic energy. This decontamination and subsequent recontamination essentially (re)creates the guitar anew. This begins a process of assimilation into self that is completed only after it is played by him for “months” after. Thus, the stripping and buffing lead to the partial incorporation into self via the processes of contamination and (re)creation (which, in turn, relies on decontamination and recontamination). The subsequent focus on playing the guitar exclusively then completes the incorporation into self via the process of “knowing intimately”—which also involves further contamination of the guitar by the player.

A new guitar has not been contaminated by a previous owner’s essence so decontamination is not required. But for a used guitar, decontamination is needed—with one important exception. If the previous owner or user was an admired person, such as a celebrated performer, then the previous owner’s essence would likely be carefully preserved. Thus, we see that players recognize the contagious magic in their instruments. Our data indicated that if the source of contagion is perceived negatively, a player will decontaminate his instrument to remove the negative essence. Conversely, if the source of magic is perceived positively, the player will retain the positive essence.
Belk (1988) suggested that objects could be incorporated into self via four processes: controlling, creating, knowing intimately, and contaminating. Our interpretation of Joey’s comments reveals that the processes of creation and knowing intimately both depend on and demonstrate the ability to “control” (i.e., appropriate for one’s exclusive use) the object in question. Therefore, since creation and knowing involve contaminating, control can be said to also involve contaminating. In other words, all four processes of extending an object into self involve contamination, suggesting that contamination and the contagious magic it arises from is the critical mechanism in assimilating a material object into self.

Empowerment from a Replica-Fetish

The magical thinking processes that imbue a replica with power and the tangibilization of that magical thinking to create aura for that replica can continue throughout the consumer’s relationship with that replica. However, it is likely that the replica-fetish has to be imbued with at least some power and aura before its possessor feels empowered by it. We discuss the empowerment provided by fetishized possessions using three examples that occupy three different positions on a continuum between temporary/imaginary/private empowerment and sustained/authentic/public empowerment.

Temporary Imaginary Private Empowerment. We believe that for most consumers dreaming of stardom, fetishes most commonly facilitate privately imagined, but emotionally vivid, self-transformations. For both social and biological reasons, teenagers and young adults are especially likely to engage in such private daydreams of fame where they play the lead role (Halpern 2007). In particular, our data reveal some informants engaging in fantasy performances to imaginary audiences where they played the fabled role of a famous rock star. An example of one such privately imagined imaginary audience where they played the fabled role of a famous rock star. Hence, they play the lead role (Halpern 2007). In particular, our data reveal some informants engaging in fantasy performances to imaginary audiences where they played the fabled role of a famous rock star. An example of one such privately imagined (Halpern 2007) where they played the fabled role of a famous rock star. Hence, they play the lead role (Halpern 2007). In particular, our data reveal some informants engaging in fantasy performances to imaginary audiences where they played the fabled role of a famous rock star. An example of one such privately imagined (Halpern 2007)

Interviewer: So when you are playing [your guitar] by yourself do you ever imagine that you are playing with somebody else?

Billy: No. I imagine that I am [emphasis present] someone else—sometimes. When I am playing “Foo Fighters” [songs] and maybe I have just seen them in concert and I will think “Here I am, I’m Dave Grohl [leader of the “Foo Fighters”] and here I am playing in front of this huge crowd.” I will try to sing just like him... You do fantasize about that sort of thing—being right there and performing to thousands of people.

Interviewer: So you literally see yourself on stage and think about how it feels to have all those people in front of you?

Billy: Yeah [nodding head in agreement]. But then you get the opportunity to perform in front of someone and it doesn’t sound the same as when you are alone performing. It never is the same as it does when you are alone on your own performing. I don’t know why that is.

We speculate that the power of most guitar fetishes is a self-transformation made manifest in a private and imagined manner, allowing Billy to be a legend in his own mind. Such private fantasies enable a degree of control impossible with a real sentient human audience—as opposed to the imagined audience. Billy’s private fantasy also permits control of his own perceived artistry. This was evident when Billy told us about preferring to play his favorite guitar alone in his room rather than to “play” music using the electronic game Guitar Hero because Guitar Hero “doesn’t make you sound better than you are.” This implies that, in contrast to Guitar Hero, Billy’s favorite guitar does “make” him sound better than he is, empowering him in the privacy of his room. Furthermore, even this modest empowerment can start the process whereby the locus of control between possessor and object becomes increasingly ambiguous.

In some ways, these private guitar fantasies are not unlike the fantasy images and objects used in privately experienced psycho-sexual fetishes. For when a sexual fetishist transfers erotic animation to, for example, a boot or other article of clothing (Schroeder and Borgerson 2003), then consummate human-to-human sexual satisfaction is achieved only in the mind of the fetishist when alone with his boot. Moreover, despite his rational knowledge that the boot is inanimate and his knowledge of the dominant conformist sexual mores of his culture, the boot fetishist obtains sexual pleasure outside of the domain of “real” consummate sexual gratification as defined by dominant cultural mores. But common in all such privately imagined empowerments is a belief that veneration and manipulation of an empowered fetish can attain particular ends—if only in the private world of the believer.

As described earlier in the article, Jack went beyond Billy, who merely imagined he was the star performer he admired most while playing alone in his room. Jack used technology to sonically create an imaginary Byrds band (sans Roger McGuinn) to play along with Jack’s impersonation of Roger McGuinn’s playing. Jack’s empowerment was cocreated by himself, his, his iconically and sonically authentic Signature McGuinn guitar, and the Byrds’ recordings to (re)create himself as Roger McGuinn for his own consumption. Jack’s comment in the epigraph that his guitar “takes him places he couldn’t go without it” suggests that he views his guitar as empowering.

Periodic Staged Communal Empowerment. Distinct from the type of private empowerment illustrated by Billy and Jack, other informants engaged in more public and collectively constructed imaginary empowerments. However, our reflection on locus of performance revealed a dialectical tension between realism and success. Moving the performance from a private to a public domain increases the realism of the fantasy but simultaneously increases the uncertainty of a positive outcome. As we will show, the key
to successfully moving play to a public arena is successfully controlling staging to encourage a communal experience.

Such controlled staging was exhibited in an elaborate manner in Mike’s performances with his senior employees in his rock band, The Mersey Beats. Mike’s band plays in a “nightclub-like” private area hidden away on the top floor of the main store of the chain of music stores that Mike owns. In comparison to many “wannabe” rock stars who we believe must settle for private fantasies, Mike (as we discussed earlier) had considerable financial means, which allowed him to acquire many objects evoking the Beatles, their gear, and their era. In the following, Mike describes the nightclub stage of what he calls “The Mersey Beat Club,” as depicted in figure 3.

His stage was completely set up with a drum-kit, guitars, amps, and microphones and was ready for a show. Mike’s detailed effort at (re)creating a Beatles stage was evident in his descriptive comments when showing two interviewers the stage. He told them, “That’s the exact [Beatles] setup. Paul used to stand there [pointing left] in front of the Vox bass amp. George was there on Paul’s left, John was there [pointing right], Ringo there [pointing center]. And two mikes. They only ever used two mikes out front; they would harmonize through one. They would share one mike. The keyboard is the keyboard they toured with in 1965. . . . That is the classic stage. It is all set up even with vintage Shure Brothers microphones of the era. . . . It is not just a picture, it’s the real thing.” Mike then went on to describe how the Mersey Beat Club provided a stage on which to live out his fantasy of being a rock star.

Mike: In here it is pretty raucous. Very, very loud, lot’s of drinks being consumed, lots of people falling over. We generally start at 8 and finish at 4 in the morning—and so you can imagine—and we’re all rock n’ rollers. . . . What we do—we have a band which is me, my [business] partner, a couple of the department managers, and another store manager. We call ourselves the Mersey Beats. . . . It is just about having fun. And it works very, very well.

Interviewer: Is there a different experience playing [a Beatles song like] “I’m Down” or “Tax Man” with one of the Beatles’s guitars like your John Lennon “Miami” Rickenbacker? As opposed to picking up some Fender Stratocaster?

Mike: Are you saying does the artistic content of John [Lennon] sort of come through or his soul come through or something? . . . Look, I’m not a great guitarist, . . . but it is nice to play a guitar that is just like the one your heroes play. . . . It is only a piece of wood with some wire on it shaped.
We had initially learned of Mike’s Mersey Beat Club through his employee Harry, who told us: “Mike loves it! Because Mike is primarily a businessman and he’s not much of a musician. And so any chance he gets to get up there with a Beatles guitar in his hand he just relishes it. He loves it. He’s put the Mersey Beat Band together and he’s the front man—he sings and plays rhythm guitar and he wants to get up and do all these gigs. . . . Mike loves getting up there with a guitar in his hand—playing rock star. He loves it!” Harry went on to tell us that Mike, after participating in a “show” at the Mersey Beat Club, would often suggest that the Mersey Beats play additional gigs at more commercial venues, but the rest of the band would find excuses not to do so because as he put it, “Mike, you’re a good guy, but you are not quite that good [a player] to go out and gig with!”

In comparison to many “wannabe” rock stars who we believe must settle for singing alone into the shower head “microphone” or other private fantasies—like Billy’s private transformation into Dave Grohl—Mike’s financial means allowed him to seek out instruments that were replicas of the instruments the Beatles used in their early years and with these replicas deliberately cocreate a staged communal empowerment. Mike’s periodic empowerment has been made more publicly vivid through staging aimed at enhancing the scope and depth of the fantasy. Despite his self-acknowledged musical limitations, Mike is able to temporarily transcend the boundaries of reality to experience a temporary representation of reality termed a simulacrum (Baudrillard 1981/1994). With the assistance of his own musically talented employees, his own nightclub, a presumably friendly audience that has enjoyed his open bar, and his vintage instruments, Mike more publicly fulfills his dream of a lifetime—being a rock star like John Lennon—several times a year.

Because of this fantasy’s communal construction, we propose that the fantasy is also shared by others besides Mike, that is, those who were also on stage and in the audience of the Mersey Beat Club. Just as Hollywood movie patrons are aware that they are experiencing a fictional portrayal and not real life when watching a James Bond film, we suspect that those in Mike’s club knew they were not at a Beatles’s show at the Cavern Club in Liverpool or the Star Club in Hamburg in 1962. This process of empathizing with a fictional performance is characterized in literature and the performing arts as a temporary “willing suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge 1817/1975). This communal consumption of fantasy has also been found in other consumption contexts as diverse as Mountain Men (Belk and Costa 1998) and Harley Davidson bikers (Schouten and Alexander 1995). We believe that others in the club, besides Mike, also willingly suspended their disbelief so as to more fully enjoy and experience the evening. Moreover, this communal fantasy then enabled positive feedback to Mike such that his own fantasy was even more enabled; that is, to the degree that he was appreciated by his audience, then Mike’s own fantasy was all the more gratifying. The employees and favored customers in the audience are more likely than the general public to have the specialist knowledge needed to decipher the symbolism of the replica instruments being used, and thus they are able to appreciate the performance more deeply. Players and audience both reinforce each others’ roles in what Deighton (1992) terms a dramatistic performance.

Thus, Mike’s occasional, but vivid, fulfillments of his dream are staged and socially constructed and occur more realistic than a purely private imaginary performance. Nonetheless, this is still a fantasy, as although Mike is a stellar businessman, he—both in his own estimation and in the estimation of others—does not have talent to emulate the rock star he has dreamed of becoming for most of his life. We believe such staged and socially constructed fantasies are another relatively common way that fetishized electric guitars are consumed. In particular, when any amateur rock band performs in rehearsal or in front of a known community (such as an audience of friends at a school dance or a church concert), such fantasy play may occur.

As this section revealed, for those aspiring to the dream of stardom, we believe fetishes facilitate privately and publically imagined, but emotionally vivid, imaginary fantasy self-transformations. With respect to using possessions as self-extensions, this reflects incorporating a possession inward to a less developed and less actualized self. Being less developed, these aspiring stars are likely to have more porous, thinner boundaries that permit absorption of outside entities such as celebrities (Houran, Navik, and Zerrusen 2005). Those who can only dream of rock stardom seek to assimilate into themselves the extensions of another, another who is a more successful rock performer. Thus, for example, Mike played a factory-issued iconic replica of a Rickenbacker guitar like John Lennon’s Rickenbacker guitar and Artie created his own icon of Billy Corgan’s guitar. This approach to viewing possessions—as an assimilation into self of the extension of another’s more acclaimed self—is, we believe, relevant to most consumers’ use of fetish objects, as such consumers are more likely to be only dreaming the dream of stardom. This raises the question of how fetishes may function for those living the life of stardom.

Sustained Authentic Public Empowerment. A few blessed with sufficient ability, determination, and opportunity will actually live their dream of stardom in a socially constructed public reality. Joey, a legendary rock star whose major hit recordings were in the 1970s and 1980s, described how he continues to be empowered by “Goldie”:

When I’m up on stage, when I take out Goldie on stage I become that guy when I was 19, I play different! [emphasis present]. Lenny [a long-time collaborator] says, “you play different on that guitar”—I say, “I know!” because I’m channeling back to that era when I recorded “My International Hit”—I’m suddenly transported to that year.
Later, when asked why he owned so many guitars, Joey told the interviewer:

“Each guitar has a soul. Why do I have 117 guitars? ’Coz I pick up the ’54 Strat[ocaster] and I’m channeling Buddy Holly because that’s [just like] the exact guitar he played, same year, same everything, same finish. So in a way it becomes the soul of the [original] guitar in my mind, I don’t know where this guitar has been, obviously it’s not Buddy’s.

. . . Every guitar brings out a mood in me. Not only a different sound but a different mood. The story behind the guitar—you don’t usually know the story behind it but you know your own story—guitars that have been with you for 40 years, they all have a story . . . they all take on a soul. So, the stories behind my own guitars give them a characteristic—of course we’re still doing 30 or 35 shows a year, [and] I’ll remember, “that’s the guitar I played with the Turtles or Chubby Checker and that was a great show” and the memories . . . I’m making new stories.

On the surface, this appears to imply that Joey enjoys playing his different guitars for the different sounds they allow him to create and for the different celebrities they evoke for him. But a deeper reading of Joey’s story reveals that his “Buddy Holly” guitar is animated (“has a soul”), becomes viewed as (i.e., conflated with) Buddy Holly’s original guitar (“becomes the soul”), and empowers him (“brings out a mood”). It influences how he plays, and he views the locus of control between the guitar and himself as ambiguous. The guitar exhibits all of Ellen’s (1988) characteristics of a fetish and is a magical object that influences and empowers him.

Although Joey has created his own unique sound, we also note that Joey, although still a legendary performer, is no longer as successful as he was in his heyday. In his current band, he has mentored a younger player into the lead singer-guitarist role he formerly filled himself. So it is possible that Joey, in recognizing the inexorable progress of time, once again seeks the magic in (re)productions of admired star performers’ instruments. And it is the story that Joey has created with each special guitar that gives that guitar its own power. The tangible evidence of that story (in the form of iconic and indexical cues) imbues the guitar with aura, making it more than one of many (re)productions.

Joey’s desire to “channel” an admired star performer via a close-as-possible replica of that star performer’s instrument reflects the interactive nature of contagious and imitative magic. Joey appears to believe he can be contaminated with the essence of an original player by playing a replica of that player’s instrument. The Buddy Holly guitar mentioned earlier is, as Joey later explained, actually a co-issue of Buddy’s instrument. In other words, Joey’s guitar was created in the same production run as Buddy Holly’s guitar. Instead of being a later reissue, replica, or signature model, akin to a descendent of Buddy Holly’s relic, it was more like a sibling, or a co-relic. The co-relic allows Joey to channel Buddy for his own enjoyment. Even more importantly for Joey, playing with another guitar—Goldie—allows him to channel the essence of his younger self for his baby boomer fans who still greatly admire his live performances of his early songs.

Joey’s Goldie guitar performs the classical function of a fetish in empowering him in two ways. First, it provides an “associated” contagion in that the instrument elicits an emotional response from this performer that is born not of the instrument’s inherent qualities but to his prior repeated success and experience with the instrument. It is this repetition that gives the guitar its power, just as the repetition of a ritual increases it potency (Yelle 2003). It serves as a reminder of his youth—and helps conjure the youthful persona that his present mature audiences wish to revisit. Being a true self-extension (Belk 1988) of his star performer self, it once helped create, and continues to express, Joey’s rock star identity to himself and to his loyal fans. Second, Goldie, with its storied past including contagion by rock deity Duane Allman, carries the magical essence of rock and roll, as shown below, continues to empower Joey. Consequently, it is Goldie that is enshrined in his home (between his master bedroom and his personal studio) and on his personal Web site. Forty years after he purchased Goldie, playing Goldie can still make him feel “like the kid opening up for Led Zeppelin.”

Joey’s attribution of causality to Goldie suggests that he has conflated Goldie with the success it signifies. Conflation, Ellen’s (1988) third characteristic of a fetish, is the result of fusing together two elements; in fetishization this means that the material thing itself is regarded by believers as an active causal agent as much as any abstraction it signifies. Thus, the abstract being signified is treated as though it is embodied in the signer. Like religious relics (Geary 1990), many fetishes have become viewed as causative agents in their own right, rather than merely standing for something else. This conflation leads to ambiguity of control because it becomes increasingly unclear whether the object controls the user or vice versa. Initially the power resides less with the objects in the stage of concretization—when the objects are manipulated and controlled by humans. However, the locus of control shifts when the object itself is perceived to have a power to alter the conditions of human life. Joey’s comment about his 40 years with Goldie creating a story that allows Goldie to take on a “soul” suggests to us that it is the relationship between Joey and Goldie that has collectively given Goldie its own aura and fetishized Goldie. Likewise, Jack’s comment that his signature McGuinn Rickenbacker is “a magical instrument [that] takes me to places that I couldn’t go without it” speak to the ambiguity of the role of his own musical skill versus his “magical” instrument in his performance. The cross-contamination between the player and his instrument fuses them together. The prior animation and personification of the instrument makes this relationship more akin to that of a human partnership or shared selves (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005), creating ambiguity as to which partner is in control.

Our examination of fetishes has contributed additional
insight to Ellen’s notion of conflation. We have found that rather than the one-time conflation between signifier and signified suggested by Ellen (1988), conflation can occur more than once in contemporary fetishization processes. We contribute by showing how conflation between the star performer and his relic-fetish occurs early in the fetishization cycle and how conflation between the relic-fetish and the replica-fetish occurs later in the cycle. We contribute by clarifying how Ellen (1988)’s two discrete stages of empowerment and ambiguity of control are intertwined and mutually reinforcing.

Our data reveal that as our informants perform with their instruments, they create, reinforce, and further amplify the meaning in their instruments. However, more than just accumulating meaning, they perceive their instruments as accruing power. This perceived power conflates the instrument with their successful performances. This conflation leads, in turn, to a player attributing agency to that particular instrument. Repeated successful performances operate via contagious magic to permeate the instrument with power and thence with an aura of its own. This replica augmented with its aura becomes a fetish in the mind of its possessor. If talented performers achieve significant success, they attract fans of their own. These fans may be inspired to imitate the successful performer, and they may seek a (re)production of star performer’s instrument, completing the cycle of fetishization.

Cyclical (Re)production of Fetishes

Our final section of findings depicts the ways fetishes are (re)produced over time in a repetitive reproductive cycle. Roy (WM47), an accomplished musician with several compact discs in the marketplace, explained that his first “good” guitar had been a used Kohno guitar, chosen because it was an identical model to his revered guitar teacher’s instrument. He explained that the Kohno had been his only guitar until he was recently given the new guitar he was currently playing.

Roy: My old teacher, Benny, rings me up the day after I got this [new guitar by one of my students] and says “can I borrow your Kohno guitar to record something because my Kohno has finally died.” His guitar [that] he’s had since 1967, it’s completely [emphasis present] battered, it’s like Willy Nelson’s guitar, it’s got holes in it, and it completely died, so I said to him, “you have my Kohno” so I gave it to him.

Interviewer: So you gave it to him?

Roy: Well, I was given this, and he needed a guitar, so it just worked out perfectly.

Roy’s Kohno was his only guitar until he received his student’s gift, at which point he gave his Kohno to his own former teacher. Roy’s Kohno was an iconic replica of his revered guitar teacher’s Kohno, and now, replete with indexical cues to Roy’s history with the guitar, was offered back to the teacher. Just as Roy’s student gave him a gift of a special guitar, Ross replicated the act, by giving his own teacher the gift of a special guitar with indexical meaning. Drawing on symbolic self-completion theory (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982), we suggest that the replica of the teacher’s guitar was initially acquired because the novice Roy sought to extend self by assimilating a replica of an admired other’s instrument. When he became an accomplished performer in his own estimation, he no longer needed the replica. The subsequent letting go of the once-needed replica was a self signal to Roy (that he is now complete and independent of his teacher) that was simultaneously a grateful and graceful acknowledgement of his debt to his mentor. The protégé had come full circle.

In sharp contrast to Roy, who was adamant that he only needed one main instrument at any one time, Joey, the legendary rock star, owns over 100 guitars, including the aforementioned Les Paul Gibson Goldtop he named “Goldie.”

Our prior findings report how Joey’s nascent rock star self originally bought his 1969 Les Paul replica guitar in an attempt to become like established stars from the 1960s. But how did this one particular guitar—out of Joey’s collection of over 100 guitars—become the fetish that he believes empowers him even today after he has become an established rock star in his own right? We believe that because Joey’s first hit song was written and performed on that particular guitar, Joey’s “Goldie” has a first-hand indexical meaning linked to success. Joey said:

This is the actual guitar that, you know, who knew that it would make history? You know? We went over to CBS studios with our manager and cut this song that I thought nothing about, but it was “My International Hit,” and so this guitar played that song, and it’s a very special guitar.

As the same possession is used again and more success is achieved, because of the effect of repeated successes, a privately held conflation where a material possession is tied to the success has been cemented in place. If the player achieves sufficient success, his instrument may be conventionally accepted as a symbol of that success. To use Ellen’s (1988) terminology, the player’s guitar may be conflated with the success of the player. Interpreting two closely occurring events as though one caused the other is another form of contagious magic (Alcock 1995).

We believe that Joey’s fetishization of the “Goldie” guitar was originally a privately held belief. However, as stars become more celebrated and exhibit sustained, authentic empowerment, their success is not just conflated with their instrument in their own eyes. Others also conflate the star’s instrument with the star’s success, making the instrument a publicly desired fetish that is likely to be replicated by others. Given the Web page dedicated to this guitar, his large international audience of fans, and Joey’s repeated use of this guitar on stage, in recordings, and in popular media feature stories, the homemade creation of a replica icon of the “Goldie” guitar by a fan—like Artie’s icon of Billy Corgan’s guitar—is certainly possible. A more widely held
fetishization of the “Goldie” guitar is not out of the question. Joey would like a Gibson-factory-produced Joey “Goldie” model. He said:

Maybe some day there will be a Joey Goldie guitar? . . . If Gibson [Guitar Company] did do a model to my [emphasis present] specs . . . it would be a custom guitar with components which I’d like—the right color with the right aging, the right pickups, the right neck—all the elements in one guitar.

An iconic factory issue of a Goldie replica could provide more widely available potential fetish instruments for fans with dreams of being in Joey’s shoes.

Subsequently, since the market had not yet provided replicas of Joey’s Goldie instrument, he conceived of another special instrument, and he now cocreates replicas of this new instrument with the supply side of the market for the demand side of the market. He originally commissioned an artist to customize a newly purchased, mass-reproduced instrument with a painting evoking the theme of his most successful hit song. After using that custom instrument on stage, he responded to fans’ requests for copies of it by financing the production and sale of such replicas himself. Said Joey of his cocreated replicas:

When I pick up one of . . . [these cocreated replicas] . . . there is definitely just an extra mojo to it knowing not only the craftsmanship that originally went into the guitar, but then just knowing what went into the design and painting of each and the laying of her [the artist’s] hands on each one. To tell you the truth, I play over my head when I play one of these because of all that went into each one. You can’t really articulate it, but it is something that is present and you feel it. With these guitars your mind and fingers take you someplace else, someplace further still.

In contemporary consumption, a new mass-consumed iconic copy of an original relic-fetish appears created from something old and something new. It is initially based on an extant fetish object used by nascent performers who want to infuse the star power of already established stars. Subsequently, through a newly formed conflation involving a newly established star and an existing fetish, a new fetish object is reproduced. For example, consider Joe Perry (Aerosmith’s lead guitarist) and his comments on his teenage experiences: “The first time I saw Jeff Beck . . . I think that’s when I said ‘I have to have a Les Paul [guitar].’ . . . When they were touring on their first record [in 1968], I actually sat in front of his amps . . . I had to have a Les Paul after that” (Prown and Sharken 2003, 56). Thus, during his own nascent period, Perry was imitative and sought to assimilate into himself the star power of another. Subsequently, Perry achieved legendary success with Aerosmith, and his Les Paul guitar had been singularized into his “Bone Yard” guitar. Then, in 1997, the Gibson guitar company issued a factory-produced iconic replica in the form of a Joe Perry “Bone Yard” model Les Paul guitar (Prown and Sharken 2003). Thus, it is reasonable to believe that among the new generation of aspiring rock stars who do not know Jeff Beck, some do perceive a “Bone Yard” guitar as something that can infuse Perry’s star power into their own guitar playing. Thus, what likely began with a fetish in the form of a Les Paul guitar like Jeff Beck’s is reproduced into a new fetish in the form of Perry’s “Boneyard” guitar.

We propose that fetishization is a repetitive reproductive cycle. Although the complete progression from imitator of originator through to imitated originator is likely for only for a few fortunate consumers—given that each successive new generation of fans produces new star performers—then this cycle occurs with some regularity over time.

**DISCUSSION**

The influential Consumer Odyssey (Belk et al. 1989) suggested that deep meaning in possessions could be understood with four concepts: the extended self, the sacred-profane distinction in consumption, anthropomorphization, and fetishism (Wallendorf and Belk 1987; Wallendorf, Belk, and Heisley 1988). Subsequently, consumer researchers have shed light on possession meaning by examining the first three: the extended self (e.g., Belk 1988), the sacred-profane distinction in consumption (e.g., Belk et al. 1989), and anthropomorphization (e.g., Aggarwal and McGill 2007). Our research contributes by illuminating deep meaning through the fourth and relatively neglected phenomenon of fetishism.

Our project goes beyond prior consumer research that views fetishes solely and exclusively as objects of devotion. Our examination of the fetishization of possessions in the context of their use-value extends consumer researchers’ understanding of fetishization. We accomplish this by showing how consumers seek and receive perceived magical empowerment from possessions and how power, like meaning, can flow from one entity to another via magical thinking. Our research extends previous examinations of fetish objects collected for their exhibition value (Belk 1991, 1995, 2001) to consider the perceived empowerment that fetish objects offer consumers as they use these fetish objects. In contrast to the four discrete cognitive elements suggested by Ellen (1988), our research reveals a more organic, incremental perspective of fetishism. In doing so, we offer a fluid cyclical process of contemporary fetishization that inherently reshapes Ellen’s more static perspective of fetishization and that suggests a continuum of fetish objects. Our updated perspective reveals that possessions can be valued for their potential as conveyors of magical empowerment—a source of value that consumer researchers had not yet examined in the context of mass-produced material objects.

We portray a process by which consumers transform mass-produced objects into relics and replicas and show how both relics and replicas may become valued as fetish objects. As our work demonstrates, some consumers believe such fetish objects will help them become more successful in their performance endeavors. Although we have used the example of guitars to illustrate this process, we believe our ideas are directly applicable to some other consumer contexts. We suspect the process that we describe is most applicable to those
contexts where (1) success in a given endeavor is far from certain, (2) consumers are highly motivated to ensure success, (3) performance is necessarily intertwined and integral with the use of a material object, (4) an empowerment ambiguity is perceived to exist between a star performer’s success and some material object, and (5) opportunity exists for other consumers to forge indexical or iconic links between their possessions and a star performer’s possession.

For example, two consumption contexts that fulfill the above criteria are professional baseball (Gmelch 2008) and competitive yacht racing (Melges and Mason 1987). However, since most professional baseball players and competitive sailors—like our guitarist informants—are male, we particularly call for future research to examine the influence of gender on the fetishization processes. If fetishization is not gender specific, then our findings may offer future researchers some insight as to why some celebrity-branded fashion and makeup lines are successful with female consumers beyond merely what would be expected from a celebrity endorsement effect.

Prior consumer research has examined the influence of consumer characteristics and ritualized behaviors in creating a magical experience (Arnould and Price 2003; Arnould, Price, and Otnes 1999). However, this research did not appear to deal with the roles played by magical objects (alone or in concert with consumers and rituals) in creating that magical experience. Our research addresses this gap by foregrounding the role of the fetishized material object. We do, however, recognize the joint and interdependent roles of fetish objects and ritualized behaviors. For example, a Christian musician may regularly pray before each performance to ask that his special instrument will perform flawlessly. Thus, we call for future research that more deeply examines the interrelationships between consumer characteristics, ritualized behaviors, and material objects.

Our first research question asked how replicas become perceived as accruing power. Our findings demonstrate the existence of, and some consequences of, magical thinking with respect to contemporary consumption of objects with use value. Although consumers might fetishize material objects, a fetish object does not guarantee a hit recording, a major league record, or a safe return home from battle. Nevertheless, in keeping with research in sports anthropology (Gmelch 2008), we argue that fetish objects increase confidence and reduce anxiety and hence increase performance. Moreover, research on automated processes (Bargh and Williams 2006) provides a foundation to suggest that fetishes may enhance star performers’ objective performances insofar as they serve to trigger executions of automatic unconscious motor-behavioral sequences that have been previously perfected though years of prior practice. In contrast to behaviors driven by deliberative conscious intent, such rapid-fire automatic motor-behavioral responses are likely integral to success in many valued human pursuits, including, but not limited to, music, sports, and warfare. Thus, contrary to much of conventional thought, we believe it is reasonable to think that fetish possessions can have a subtle but measurable effect in the lives of talented performers who own and use them.

However, we do note that there are differing views on the appropriateness of tangibilizing sacred or magical power. For example, Hindu culture is replete with tangible sacred icons (Davis 1997), Islamic culture is relatively aniconic (Allen 1986), and some even view tangibilization as diminishing the power it represents (e.g., McDannell 1995). Although digital music, art, and writing are fundamentally intangible, some instances of these may be considered to be magical or sacred. Consequently, we call for research that examines the boundary conditions under which tangibilization of magical thinking is or is not appropriate and/or effective.

The extraordinary relic objects consumers desire are charged with aura because such objects are perceived as having the power to transform and hence engender awe for those in their presence. That awe for unattainable relics then engenders a desire for that relic—and that desire imbues even more aura into relics in a virtuous cycle. Consequently, it is critical to understand how aura initially comes to accrue to an entity and how it is transmitted to successive generations of objects and consumers. So our second question asked how consumers made their magical thinking tangible in their replicas such that these replicas become perceived as radiating aura. In answer, we examined how consumers semiotically signify their magical thinking in their replicas. This allowed us to demonstrate that the agency by which the aura is created arises from the storied relationship that a consumer shares with his possession. This relationship arises and has agency because of the repeated successful interactions of consumer and object over time.

Consequently, our research contributes by explaining how consumers’ storied possessions tangibilize their magical thinking. Belk et al. (1989) noted that “tangibilized contamination,” the process of preserving fleeting experiences in objects such as photographs and souvenirs, is one means by which consumers preserve sacredness. Our findings explain why photographs and souvenirs are particularly potent means of tangibilizing people, experiences, and/or places—because these signifiers carry reinforcing iconic and indexical links to the originals being signified. However, having found that, in the case of signature guitars, consumers appear to be willing to trade off iconicity for indexicality, we call for future research that further examines the trade-offs between various degrees of iconicity and indexicality.

Third, we asked: how do replicas empower their possessors such that the replicas become desired by others? Our model of fetishization goes beyond Ellen’s (1988) to consider empowerment. Although our cyclical model of contemporary fetishization fundamentally redefines Ellen’s (1988)’s more static, linear view, we do not claim that Ellen’s four characteristics of fetishes no longer apply. Instead, we suggest that his four characteristics are not necessarily sequential; rather they may develop and deepen during different phases of our fetishization process. For example, we found that con-
flation may occur more than once in the cycle and that it may involve different entities. We observed conflation between a star performer and his or her relic instrument (early in the cycle) and conflation between the relic instrument and the replica (later in the cycle).

In answering our three research questions, we contribute further by demonstrating the increasing creative agency of consumers vis-à-vis the market. Given the scarcity of relics, consumers are constrained to obtaining the best possible replica of that relic that is available to them in the market (within their financial means). No longer content to passively acquire meaning from the market, contemporary consumers imbue additional iconicity, and if they are resourceful and/or fortunate enough, a modicum of indexicality on their replica. This may involve modifying and/or relic’ing (intentionally aging) the replica. Our contention of consumer proactiveness in the processes of fetishization has important implications for consumer researchers’ theorization of the consumption of mass-reproduced objects. Contemporary consumers are no longer solely passive receivers of meaning from the culturally constituted world (McCracken 1986). Instead, as our research demonstrates, the top-down movement of meaning assumed by McCracken’s (1986) model, while still continuing to be relevant today, should now be complemented by a bottom-up movement of meaning. Consumers have progressed to more actively cocreating meaning with culture, celebrities, and media. Our research has revealed that today’s consumers, faced with the age-old scarcity of relics, have found alternative, proactive means of attaining fetishes with which to cocreate exceptional performances.

Consumers’ transformations from mere receivers of meaning to proactive agents of meaning imply that cultural meaning can and does change far more quickly than ever before. Even celebrities who are not official endorsers of a product and/or brand become de facto endorsers if they are observed using that product and/or brand. Researchers examining the cool-hunting phenomenon (O’Donnell and Wardlow 2000) may wish to examine the relative effectiveness of official versus de facto celebrity endorsement. The increasingly dynamic movement of meaning also blurs the disjunction between the “real thing” and the copy, helping to explain the popularity of “reality” television and celebrities who are “famous for being famous,” and heralding the age of precession of simulacra, where the simulacrum precedes the real and is mistaken for it (Baudrillard 1981/1994). For example, younger consumers, when hearing classic songs, may declare them to be copies of the newer recreations they are more familiar with, or a city dweller, when visiting a rural area, might declare it to be “just like Farmville” (the world’s most popular virtual farming game). We call for more research that examines the precession of simulacra and its implications for consumption.

Our use of magical thinking to explain fetishism has revealed another basis of deep meaning in possessions, as foretold by Belk, Wallendorf, and their colleagues (Belk et al. 1989; Wallendorf and Belk 1987; Wallendorf et al. 1988).

Our research also reveals some interrelationships between fetishism and the extended self, the sacred-profane distinction, and anthropomorphization, which supports Wallendorf et al.’s (1988) contention that the four phenomena are distinct yet interrelated. First, contamination, the outcome of contagious magic, appears to be the key mechanism underlying the creation of the extended self. Second, the interrelationships between the imitative magic of the profane replica and the contagious magic of the sacred relic shed light on the profane-sacred distinction. Third, imitative magic facilitates anthropomorphization. Further opportunity to examine the interactions between these four concepts remain. For example, we observed that interactions of musicians with their instruments anthropomorphized the instruments and created emotional attachments between players and instruments. But do these two outcomes occur simultaneously, or does one precede the other? An opportunity remains to tease out this and other interrelationships. Having found that magical thinking can reveal some of the deep meaning in possessions, we encourage other researchers to employ this interpretive lens. Existing research may also be further examined using magical thinking and fetishism. For example, Muniz and Schau (2005)’s description of the Apple Newton brand community may be informed by considering the members’ collective and individual fetishization of their Newton organizers. Similarly, Brown et al.’s (2003) theorization of retro-branded products could be augmented by considering the importance of imitative and contagious magic to successfully retro-branding fetishized branded objects like the original Volkswagen Beetles.

Belk et al. (2003, 327) observe that, although marketers might portray their products as magical, consumers act like sorcerers’ apprentices in helping attach this magic to the products in question. They suggest that consumers’ acts of identifying objects of desire by observing others’ consumption, engaging in window shopping, and consuming media add magic to the desired object. Our data support their contention but contribute further by elucidating how consumers go about imbuing the very magic they seek into material objects. In this age of mass production, we argue that consumers have become the sorcerers, marketers their apprentices.

REFERENCES


QUERIES TO THE AUTHOR

q1. AU: This journal’s style avoids the use of italics for placing emphasis. Your words italicized to that purpose have been changed to roman font.

q2. AU: The only reference for Damisch, Stoberock, and Mussweiler is dated 1977. Please reconcile

q3. AU: The only Allen reference is dated 1988. Please reconcile.

q4. AU: The only Arnould and Price reference is dated 1993. Please reconcile.

q5. AU: The only Allen reference is dated 1988. Please reconcile.