

Beloved Material Possessions: Ends or Means?

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*The car smelled like rotten milk and Cheerios ... But I absolutely, unconditionally and devotedly loved that car. ... it finally hit me that my attachment to the car was that ... I was ... a mom. That was my mom car. And I loved it. And everybody in the neighborhood knew it was me, you know. And they would all wave... when I [would] drive by.*

-a reporter recalls a car she lost in an accident (Schulte 2011a, 2011b)

*She [my mother] said, "I've never heard anyone describe their car as a dating relationship." I said, "What else would you call it?" You might as well call it [my car] a girlfriend.*

-a young man recalls a conversation about his car (Lastovicka and Sirianni 2011)

Love for a material object refers to the nature and degree of consumers' emotional attachment to specific material objects—and not brands (Lastovicka and Sirianni 2011). Our epigraph presents introspections from two different consumers who both love their cars. These introspections illustrate two different metaphors used by consumer researchers in understanding consumer love for specific material objects.

The first consumer's attachment to her car reflects her "mom" identity. This is consistent with Ahuvia's (2005) portrayal of consumers' beloved possessions acting as anchors in identity construction. This is rooted in both Belk's (1988) perspective of considering meaningful possessions as extensions of self, as well as, Aron et al.'s (1991) contention that love involves a fusion of identities, where beloved others are part of a sense of self. Thus this identity metaphor treats the possession of a beloved consumer product as a *means* for forming and communicating identity both to the owner and to others. The "mom car" illustrates that "possessions are an important component of sense of self" (Belk 1988: 139).

With the second consumer, the appropriateness of the identity metaphor is less clear. In the second case, the car appears less as a *means* to some intended end (such as an identity of being masculine or financially prosperous) and more as a relational *end* in itself. This consumer has consciously blurred the person-object distinction and his relationship with his car appears to be an end in itself. Thus this second metaphor is relational. Rooted in Belk's (1987) semiotic perspective, this second view recognizes that any given consumption object's meaning is polysemous (or multiple) and idiosyncratic. Thus depending upon the private meanings of a possession to a given consumer, a possession may serve either as a means of identity construction or, alternatively as the young man's introspection illustrates, as an end in itself as an emotional partner in a consumer-object relationship (Belk 1987).

Whereas the first metaphor (of beloved possession as a means of identity construction) has received considerable application in consumer research, we will refine and further explicate the relatively less explored relational metaphor (of beloved material object as an end in a consumer-possession relationship). Thus our chapter is organized in three sections. First we review our conceptual foundations and consider a fundamental consumption phenomenon where the relational metaphor informs what the identity metaphor does not. Next we demonstrate an empirical benefit of the relational metaphor. Finally, we discuss the implications of this work for

consumer research. In particular, we note how the relational metaphor informs our understanding of smitten consumers' identities.

## CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

*The Identity Metaphor and Possessions as Means to Identity Construction.* As reviewed elsewhere (Arnould and Thompson 2005), Belk's (1988) conceptualization of the extended self has frequently been used as a theoretical basis for understanding how consumers use market-generated and consumer-co-created symbolic resources to forge self-identities. This perspective treats the possession of a beloved consumer product as a potential *means* for forming and communicating identity. Because of the prominence of this often-used and well-known perspective in the consumer research literature—which is considered in other chapters in this volume (Belk 2012)—we choose to begin with an examination of the less-well-employed perspective in which a beloved possession is viewed as a relational *end* in itself.

*The Relational Metaphor and Beloved Possessions as Relational Ends.* With exception of Lastovicka and Sirianni's (2011) research on consumers' loving relationships with their cars, computers, bicycles and firearms, the majority of prior work that has explored possessions as relational ends has focused on consumers' connections with their pets (Ahuvia 2008; Belk 1996; Hill, Gaines and Wilson 2008; Holbrook et al. 2001; Holbrook and Woodside 2008). This line of inquiry provides evidence that some consumers consider their household animals as close companions - namely as friends and family members like siblings, children and grandchildren (Hirschman 1994), and as such, include their pets in family events such as holidays and group portraits (Belk 1996). While the animals' status is not typically equal to other human family members such as human children (Belk 1996), their treatment as relationship partners – and not just as objects to meet that exist to meet consumers' needs - is justified by their inherent value (Ahuvia 2008; Beverland, Farrelly and Lim 2007). Following Holbrook et al. (2001:11), what pet owners "...share in common is a deep awareness that their relationship with one or more animal companions is an end in itself and definitely not a means to some other end such as the admiration of others, an excuse to get exercise, or a creature to protect the house against intruders." In sum, this stream of research finds that consumers purchase their pets to satisfy social needs often resulting in close, intimate ties akin to those with human relationship partners. That is, consumers' relationships with their animal companions are considered ends in themselves – and not means to achieve other goals such as forming and communicating identity.

*Limits of the Identity Metaphor.* Due to the prominence of the extended self in the consumer research literature, it is possible that the identity metaphor has become the default foundation for understanding possession love (Ahuvia 2005), brand love (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006) or attachment (Park et al. 2010). This very useful metaphor, however, is like all metaphors in that it has limitations. In particular, it does not directly consider the acquisition of beloved objects. How, for example, does infatuation begin? What sparks such love-at-first-sight? This is important as research on this form of object love, consumer infatuation, is largely absent (Lastovicka and Sirianni 2011).

When it is said that "possessions are an important component of sense of self" (Belk 1988: 139), this clearly assumes possession, and, therefore, acquisition is *fait accompli*. Those

beloved objects studied empirically with the identity metaphor are typically already owned objects that, in many cases, have histories with consumers that are well beyond an initial infatuation. For example, consider Ahuvia's (2005) deconstruction of an urban consumer's beloved antique furniture. The furniture had been owned and used on her family's ranch for decades and, as such, reflected her rancher identity. Moreover, due to the renewed fashionable nature of Mission-styled antiques, her heirlooms also solidified a sophisticated urbane identity. Ahuvia (2005) used this case to illustrate how a beloved possession resolved an identity conflict (such as between an urban versus rural identity). However, the example also illustrates that the lens of the extended self and the identity metaphor most readily informs possessing, owning and having—as opposed to acquiring a beloved object and the infatuation leading to such acquisition.

As we subsequently demonstrate, in contrast, the relationship metaphor does offer insights for addressing the questions we have posed. The deep-seated and innate motivating attachment systems described by Bowlby (1969) offer templates for early-in-life and latter-in-life interpersonal relationships (Hazran and Shaver 1987, Shaver and Mikulincer 2006). As Lastovicka and Sirianni (2011) contend, some consumer-object relationships are metaphorically enacted within these interpersonal templates. Moreover, the questions we have posed—which consider infatuation and the nascent stages of consumers' loves for material objects—have largely been ignored by prior work on consumer love.

An aesthetically beautiful material object can touch the human heart and can lead consumers to experience the emotion of love (Norman 2005). One look at an attractive product, and comparable to gazing at a beautiful person (Sternberg 1986, 2006), some consumers may experience infatuation or a love-at-first-sight response. Such infatuation may capture consumer interest and may feed an immediate and powerful desire for sensory proximity, interaction and acquisition. However, what happens if consumers who are already in-love with their own material possession are confronted with a comparable and attractive alternative product? Are they interested in the other? Or do they resist? Do such consumers surrender to temptation?

*Aesthetics and Infatuation in Interpersonal Relations.* Prior research has addressed comparable questions in interpersonal relationships. Much of this work is rooted in the Darwinian concept of intersexual selection, namely: organisms develop alluring physical and behavioral characteristics to attract potential mates. Such characteristics are thought to signal reproductive fitness (Sugiyama 2005). In research on human relationships, Walster, Aronson, Abrahams and Rottman (1966) report that physical attractiveness is the best predictor of whether a heterosexual pair will see each other beyond a first date and initiate a relationship. Passion is the quickest component of love to ignite and it is typically sparked by physical attractiveness (Sternberg 1986, 2006). Thus a physically attractive quality sparks passion and the motivational drive in passion leads to infatuation or love-at-first-sight and a desire to be proximate to the beloved. The peacock's tail feathers are the standard Darwinian example of physical attractiveness. In research on humans, several human-body-aesthetic properties—including symmetry and golden-ratio proportions—are found attractive (Schmid, Marx and Samal 2008).

Moreover, consistent with the Darwinian perspective of attractiveness signaling fitness, human body symmetry has been found empirically correlated with general intelligence (Prokosch, Yeo and Miller 2004) and athletic ability (Manning and Pickup 1998).

In human relationships, the lure of attractiveness is moderated by current relationship status. In particular, those involved in loving interpersonal relationships, relative to those who are not in such relationships, tend to devalue—and pay less attention to—attractive potential partners (Johnson and Rusbult 1989, Maner et al. 2007). Evolutionary psychologists view such devaluation of attractive others as an innate mechanism facilitating the maintenance of long-term loving relationships (Maner et al. 2007).

*Aesthetics and Infatuation in Consumer-Object Relations.* Lastovicka and Sirianni (2011) speculate that many loving consumer-object relationships are born in an infatuation, in which a consumer's initial encounter with an object's sensory experience (i.e., its look, motion, feel, scent, taste and sound) elicits a captivating aesthetic response. Lastovicka and Sirianni (2011) view infatuation as a nascent form of love characterized by passion, but without the intimacy and commitment found in other established forms of consumption love.

A material object which becomes the focus of a consumer's infatuation relies on what industrial design theorist Donald Norman (2005) calls visceral design. Norman contends that successful product designs viscerally do what nature does, with both succeeding in eliciting biologically pre-wired emotive reactions to attractive forms. One attractive form found both in-nature and in the man-made world is the golden ratio.

Euclid's  $\Phi$ , or the golden ratio, is the ratio obtained when a line through the sequential points A, B and C is cut such that the ratios of the line segments  $AC/AB = AB/BC = \Phi = 1 + \frac{1+\sqrt{5}}{2}$ , which is an irrational number approximately equal to 1.618. The mathematics of the Fibonacci sequence, logarithmic spirals and  $\Phi$  are intimately connected (Livio 2002). This ratio is a natural phenomenon, appearing ubiquitously in nature including: the spiral of DNA molecules, leaf arrangements of plants and unperturbed gestational growth (Thompson 1992, Cook 1978). In the man-made environment, some analyses of major ancient architectural achievements show evidence of  $\Phi$ ; e.g.: the Parthenon's façade and the blocks used to construct the Great Pyramids (Livio 2002). Moreover, plastic surgeons rely on  $\Phi$  when planning facial reconstructions (Bashour 2006).

Consumer researchers have investigated  $\Phi$  with two-dimensional objects and find preferences for product labels (Raghubir and Greenleaf 2006) and brand logotypes (Pittard, Ewing and Jevons 2007) with  $\Phi$ -rectangle properties; a  $\Phi$ -rectangle's longer side (L) and shorter side (S) have the ratios  $[S+L]/L = L/S = \Phi$ . Consumer research, however, has yet to consider the aesthetic appeal of  $\Phi$  in three-dimensional material objects where, for example, a profile view of the object's major horizontal line includes a  $\Phi$ -proportion. As an example of this, Norman (2005) points to the E-type Jaguar sports car—which is in the design collection of the Museum of

Modern Art in New York—as a prototype of visceral design; the ratio of the Jaguar’s total length relative to distance between the windshield and the rear of the car is nearly  $\Phi$ .

Thus sports cars with  $\Phi$ -proportioned profiles may well be attractive to consumers. However, what happens if consumers with a passion-charged relationship with their own car are confronted with such an attractive car? Does it capture their interest? Would they want to drive it? Or do they resist? If, as Lastovicka and Sirianni (2011) suggest, consumer-object relationships are metaphorically enacted within the deep-seated interpersonal templates we have discussed, then consumers in an existing passionate relationship with a beloved possession should not be interested in an attractive and comparable alternative and, consequently, a new infatuation would not be sparked. Alternatively, among the less restricted who are not in an existing passionate relationship, then infatuation with an attractive new object may occur. We now proceed to empirically examine these ideas in an experiment.

### **A RELATIONSHIP-BASED EXPERIMENT**

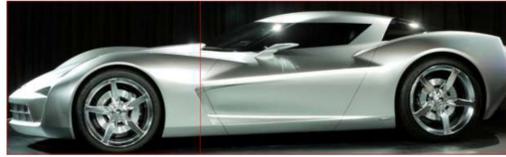
*Participants.* A total of 350 automobile-owning undergraduate students at Arizona State University participated in our laboratory experiment in exchange for course credit in an introductory business school course. Their median age was 21 years, with a mean age of 22.3 years.

*Procedure.* Upon arriving in the behavioral laboratory, participants were told they were assisting with an “Advertising Planning Study” where they would both view and rate a television program in which TV spots might be run, as well as, view and rate props being considered for use in the background of a television advertisement. In addition, they were told that they would be asked to provide some background information about themselves.

Each participant was seated in their own carrel, which was equipped with a laptop computer running data collection and stimuli presentation software/hardware. Participants then viewed and rated the short video excerpt and subsequently viewed and rated slides of two different automobiles (described as potential props for use in the background of an ad). One of the automobiles was a filler automobile and, by random assignment, the second automobile viewed was either: (1) the image of an automobile with the  $\Phi$  property or (2) an image of the same automobile digitally altered to degrade the  $\Phi$  property. The figures below portray the automobile - stimuli manipulation. The  $\Phi$ -property automobile in figure 1 was an unbranded concept car image, with a horizontal proportion like that found in the E-type Jaguar sports car.

## FIGURES 1 AND 2: AUTOMOBILE STIMULI

Unbranded Concept Car with Golden-Ratio Property



Unbranded Altered Concept Car without Golden-Ratio Property

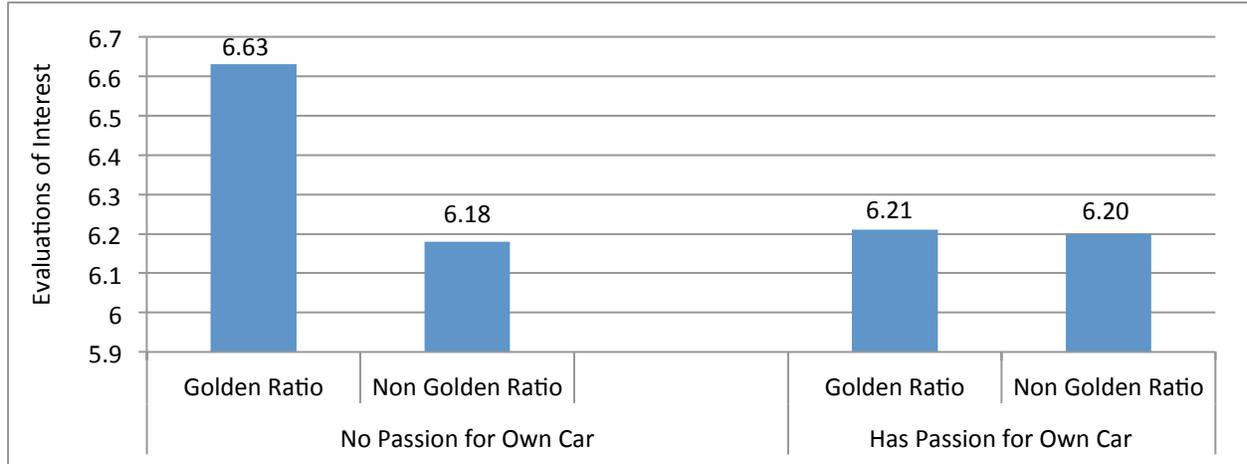


After exposure to an automobile image for 7 seconds, participants were asked how interesting they found the car on a semantic-differential (boring-interesting) scale. Response latencies (at the time of loading the screen asking of their interest and at the time of their response) were recorded. Participants were also asked if they wanted to drive the cars they were shown. Subsequently, after viewing and rating the stimuli, participants completed a set of background questions, including Lastovicka and Sirianni's (2011) material possession love battery; responses to this battery allowed classification of those above- and below-average with respect to the passion they had for their own car.

*Results.* To examine if (1) the  $\Phi$ -property of a car's design and (2) being in a passionate relationship with their own car influenced the interest in the cars viewed in the experiment, we conducted a series of 2 ( $\Phi$ -property of car: present vs. absent) x 2 (passionate relationship with own car: above average vs. below average) between-subjects analysis of variances. Using participants' interest (1 = boring – 7 = interesting) as the dependent variable, analysis showed that the  $\Phi$  proportioned car was more interesting ( $M=6.42$ ) than the non-  $\Phi$  proportioned version ( $M=6.19$ ) of the same car ( $F_{1,346}=4.59, p<.05$ ).

The degree of interest in the more attractive  $\Phi$  proportioned car, however, was moderated by whether or not consumers profess a passionate relationship with their own car ( $F_{1,346}=4.39, p<.05$ ). This interaction is portrayed in Figure 3. Those without a passionate relationship to their own car were more attracted to  $\Phi$ -based proportionality ( $t=3.28 p<.05$ ), with the  $\Phi$ -version more interesting ( $M= 6.63$ ) than the non-  $\Phi$  car ( $M=6.18$ ). In contrast, among those already in a passionate relationship with their own car ( $t=.028 p>.05$ ), the  $\Phi$ -proportioned car was just as interesting ( $M= 6.21$ ) as the other car ( $M=6.20$ ).

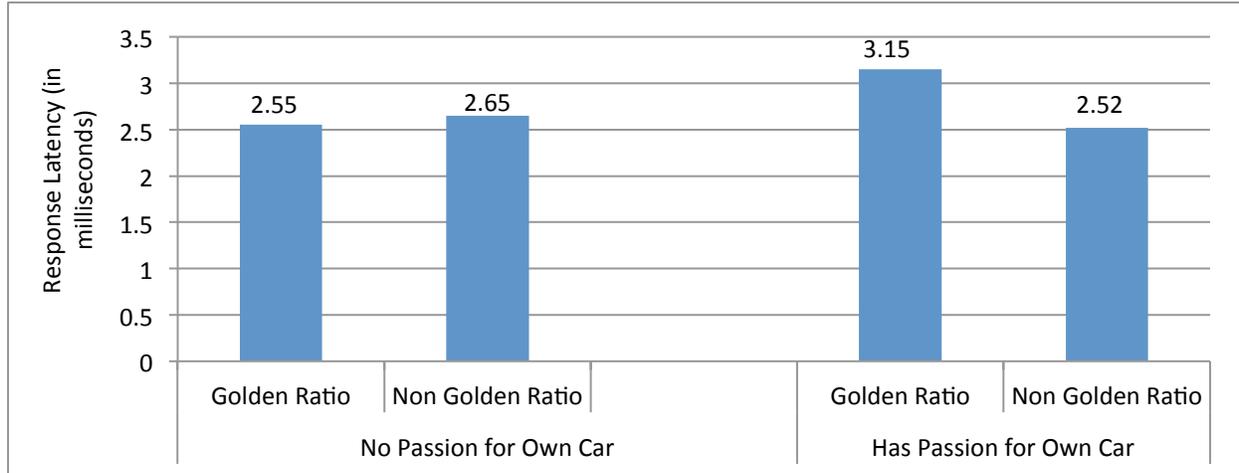
**FIGURE 3**



These results are consistent with the relational metaphor where a beloved possession is treated as a relationship partner. An image of a man-made object with a property found attractive in the natural and interpersonal environment—that is  $\Phi$ -proportionality—was overall found more interesting by consumers. However, interest in an attractively styled car occurred largely only among those who were less restricted and who were without a loving relationship with their own car. If already in a relationship with some possession, then the attractive alternative was not seen as more interesting. As found in comparable work in interpersonal relationships (Johnson and Rusbult 1989, Maner et al. 2007), those already in a relationship with a comparable object devalued a more attractive alternative.

Response latency was assessed by differencing: (1) the loading time of the screen asking the interest question, and (2) the time of the mouse click reporting degree of interest. The difference between these two times (in milliseconds) reflects the amount of time used to compose and report interest in the car viewed. Analyses showed that response latency was explained only by an interactive effect of the  $\Phi$  property of the stimuli with the relationship status of the consumer ( $F 1, 346, p < .05$ ). This interaction is portrayed in Figure 4. Consumers in a passionate relationship who were exposed to the  $\Phi$  car ( $M = 3,151$ ) were slower, and did take about one-half second more time, ( $t=2.49, p < .05$ ) in reporting their degree of interest than all other consumers ( $M=2,566$ ).

**FIGURE 4**



This second finding suggests that those in a passionate relationship with their own car engaged in more mental processing when articulating their interest in a car with the  $\Phi$  property. Whereas the prior set of results showed those with extant relationships did not evaluate the more attractive car as more interesting, this current result implies that consumers already in a passionate relationship apparently thought about the attractive alternative more. When interpreted with a relationship metaphor, this suggests—that among those in a relationship—that while a temptation to stray to the more attractive may occur, it appears that such temptation is resisted.

Participants were also asked if they wanted to drive the stimuli car (1=do not want to drive it - 7=really want to drive it). Analyses of wanting to be proximate to, and interact with, the car revealed the same patterns found as with the analyses of the interest variable. Those consumers not in a relationship wanted to drive the  $\Phi$  - proportioned car ( $M=6.24$ ) more ( $t=3.21$ ,  $p<.05$ ) than the less attractive ( $M=5.51$ ) alternative. In contrast, among those already in a relationship with their own car, wanting to drive the more attractive  $\Phi$  car ( $M=5.81$ ), was equivalent ( $t=.029$ ,  $p>.05$ ) to wanting to drive the non- $\Phi$  car ( $M=5.80$ ).

## **DISCUSSION**

A beloved possession is not necessarily only a means for constructing or maintaining self-identity; a beloved possession can also be an end in itself as an emotional partner in a consumer-object relationship. Indeed, those consumers in our experiment who were already in a relationship devalued the attractive alternative; this is comparable to that found with interpersonal relationships. It is recognized that consumers form relationships with brands (Fournier 1998) and so it should be no surprise that consumers metaphorically enact relationships with particular consumption objects.

Belk (1987: 162) speculated that depending upon the meanings held by consumers then “[an] automobile may change from being a sexual extension of self to a sex object (end rather than means).” Whether an object is a means and the identity metaphor is most appropriate, or an end when the relational metaphor is most appropriate, depends upon the life trajectory and goals of the consumer involved, but ultimately upon the meaning of the object to the consumer.

The degree to which consumers anthropomorphize (Aggarwal and McGill 2007)—or attribute human qualities to some material object—is a critical dimension of such object meaning. Commensurate with his principle of autonomy, Kant asserted that the humans should be treated as ends rather than means; Kant (1785/1959: 23) argued “rational beings are called persons inasmuch as their nature already marks them out as ends in themselves... [and] every rational being exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used ...” Once a material object is anthropomorphized and approaches being viewed in Kantian terms as autonomous and having a mind of its own, this facilitates consumers having a relationship with it. Thus we urge future research to examine how object meanings are influenced by consumer’s trait-like predispositions to anthropomorphize (Waytz, Cacioppo and Epley 2010), as well as, the situational circumstances which encourage anthropomorphizing (Chandler and Schwarz 2010). For example, it is likely that the relational phenomena we observed in our experiment are most pronounced among consumers who are most prone to anthropomorphize. Moreover, other individual difference variables may prove fruitful for understanding which metaphor is most operant. In particular, loneliness has been found associated with a tendency to anthropomorphize (Waytz, Cacioppo and Epley 2010), as well as, having a loving relationship with a possession (Lastovicka and Sirianni 2011).

Although we have treated the two metaphors as distinct, we urge future research to examine how the relational metaphor and the identity metaphor are intertwined. We suspect that a consumer’s choice to treat a beloved possession as an emotive partner in a consumer-object relationship has implications for the inadvertent and unwitting construction of an unfavorable identity in the eyes of other consumers. In particular, an all-consuming love for a possession may create social isolation, with the result of a dearth of friendships or romantic partners (Lastovicka and Sirianni 2011). Consider the following recollection from the young man, who we quoted in the opening epigraph, who consciously blurred the distinction between human- and object-relationships.

*You know, my sister came out with her friends [while I was working on the car outside] and I was talking to Maybellene [his pet name for his car]. And my sister was like: “Don’t pay any attention to the idiot talking to the car.” ... My sister’s girl friends actually laughed. ... But I was talking to her, I was telling her that I was going to shine up her new tires, get everything ready so that she could go out.*

Given the Kantian social norm that persons should be treated as ends, and objects as means, then the sister and her friends likely have constructed an unfavorable identity of the young man for

themselves. The construction of such a stigmatized self (Sandikci and Ger 2009; 2012) is a likely inadvertent result of the young man's pursuit of a consuming, but one-sided and controllable, relationship with a material object. We encourage future work to simultaneously consider both metaphors and to consider how intentional enactment of one metaphor may have inevitable consequences for the other.

The preliminary empirical work we have presented in this chapter is a first step in developing an understanding of an unexamined form of material possession love, namely: infatuation or love-at-first-sight. Prior work on material possession love has studied owners of beloved possessions who have typically owned their beloved for years; such smitten consumers are most often in more established forms of love like romantic or enduring romantic love (Lastovicka and Sirianni 2011). In contrast, in this empirical work we examined non-owners of our sports car stimuli—who although perhaps driven by a passion to have a hands-on interaction with the cars portrayed in our experiment's visual stimuli—were without first-hand intimacy or any period of committed ownership found in more established forms of love. Consumer infatuation is thought to be driven by the consumer's captivating aesthetic response to initial encounters with an object's total sensory experience (Norman 2005), that is: its look, motion, feel, scent, taste and sound (Peck and Childers 2008).

Evolutionary psychology contends that humans are hardwired for rapid-fire emotive responses to particular sets of circumstances and stimuli (Nesse and Ellsworth 2009). For example, one look at that beautiful someone across the room and—unencumbered by the thought process—many will experience infatuation or a love-at-first-sight response (Sternberg 1986, 2006). Consequently, what evolutionary psychology has learned about what humans find physically attractive should be more fully considered by consumer researchers in their pursuit of identifying object characteristics that spark consumer infatuation (Sugiyama 2005). While our empirical work was limited to examining the  $\Phi$  property of an object's visual representation, we have neglected the more complete sensory experience that consumers are exposed to outside of the laboratory. Thus we encourage researchers to go beyond this one visual property and to consider the broader palette of characteristics found attractive by evolutionary psychologists. In particular, given some our experimental participants' desire to drive and have a hands-on experience with attractive cars (Peck and Childers 2003, Peck and Wiggins 2006), then the haptic properties of initial encounters with real three-dimensional material objects—and not just merely two-dimensional images (Klatsky and Lederman 1992;1993)—should be a priority for future research.

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