

**‘Hopelessly devoted to you’ –**

**Towards an Extended Conceptualization of Consumer Devotion**

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*Advances in Consumer Research, Vol. 34, forthcoming*

Abstract

This article seeks to enhance understanding of consumer devotion through an extended, elaborate conceptualization of the concept. It draws on the extant literature on devotion as well as related concepts in consumer behavior, and adds psychological and theological insights. A synthesis carves out the psychological functionality of devotion, its emotional characteristics, and acts of devotion. We develop a tripartite view of devotion consisting of passion, intimacy, and dedication. Finally, implications for future theorizing and research are drawn.

## INTRODUCTION

In the Western consumer society, a world of wealth and abundance, yet a world almost demystified, secularized, and seemingly controllable, people feel an increased desire to find new forms and opportunities to give sense to their lives. Some consumers evidently fill this void by sacralizing products in order to fulfill their deeply rooted desire for spiritualism (Belk et al., 1989; Belk et al., 2003; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; O'Guinn and Belk, 1989; Muniz and Schau, 2005).

Through an extended conceptualization of consumer devotion, this article attempts to further our understanding about strong emotional bonds between consumers and products. Consumer behavior literature offers rich research insights into emotional consumer relationships with products, possessions, and objects in general. The Consumer Odyssey constitutes one of the first, seminal attempts to grasp the deep meanings of possessions resulting from long-lasting relationships between consumers and objects (Wallendorf et al., 1988; Belk et al., 1989). These early and influential contributions all agree on the importance of non-utilitarian functions of objects, possessions, consumption activities, and rituals (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991; Arnould and Price, 1993; Celsi et al., 1993; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) and emphasize the strong connection of objects and activities with consumers' selves and lives. Research has established that favorite objects contribute to an intensified sense of self, may serve as replacements for desired aspects of life; allure extreme attention and devotion; and often attain a sacred status.

Since the advent of postmodernist thought in consumer behavior, interest in extreme forms of emotional bonding with products has dramatically increased. Concepts, such as attachment, desire, passion, brand enthusiasm, fetishism, brand cult,

fandom, and devotion have been introduced in the literature and attracted research attention (Ball and Tasaki, 1992; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988; Belk et al., 2003; Belk, 2003; Belk and Tumbat, 2005; Kozinets, 2001; Pimentel and Reynolds, 2004).

In a recent article Pimentel and Reynolds (2004) related devotion primarily to socio-cultural phenomena, such as sports fandom, and suggest an extension of their model to a product context. Their work offers an important integration of consumer devotion-related literature. Yet, we believe the concept needs a sharper delineation from collective phenomena, and further clarification, particularly with regard to its psychological foundation. We will focus on the individual experience of such strong relationships to objects and concentrate on its privately lived aspects.

To this end, we will first provide an overview of related phenomena portrayed in consumer behavior literature. We will juxtapose these concepts with theories of love relationships in psychology and related concepts in theology. In the following synthesis emphasis will be put on both the emotional states that characterize devotion, and related acts of devotion. Finally, we will conclude with a discussion of the implications for future theorizing and research.

## **THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS**

### **Devotion in consumer research**

Pimentel and Reynolds' (2004) work is the first in the marketing literature to address the phenomenon of consumer devotion as a distinct concept. Their conceptualization of devotion locates the devoted consumer within the larger group of committed consumers. Their extremely high level of emotional bonding with the brand justifies the distinction of devotees from the rest of loyal and committed consumers. Considering football fans

as an example of devoted consumers, Pimentel and Reynolds (2004) show how devotees use special objects, as for instance fan utensils, to demonstrate a relationship to the brand. By assigning extraordinary importance and personal value to those object, objects attain a sacred status, similar to objects of religious worship.

To the devotee, the sacred object does not only represent a resource for defining and developing personal identity, but also a means of conveying this identity-construct to the environment (Pimentel & Reynolds, 2004). Pimentel and Reynolds (2004) further contend that the need for distinction, the need to belong to, or a felt void, serve as antecedents to engaging in a brand-consumer relationship. Consumption can relieve these states of emotional discomfort; it eventually leads to affective commitment towards objects. Once fans are devoted, they engage in ‘proactive sustaining behaviors’, such as pilgrimage, rituals, sacrifices, or displaying behavior, which prevent the object of devotion from re-secularization.

Pimentel and Reynolds’ (2004) approach to devotion focuses on groups and their social experiences and behaviors, similar to what has been defined as fandom in the literature (Hunt et al., 1999; Kozinets, 2001). The individual, private side of strong emotional bonds with objects has gained much less attention in the literature. By highlighting the individual facets of devotion, we offer an alternative perspective with useful consumer behavior implications.

### **Related concepts in the consumer behavior literature**

Concepts in consumer behavior regularly discuss two common elements of devotion. First, devotion is depicted as a highly emotional concept, reflecting very intense relationships between consumers and objects, or activities. Second, it has been argued

that the term 'devotion' also implies religious fervor (Pimentel and Reynolds, 2004).

Pimentel and Reynold's work also indicates that devotion is connected to strong feelings related to love, as well as feelings of spiritual or religious excitement and adoration.

Hence, devotion is characterized by *states* of devotion and result in devotional *behavior*, which are spiritual in nature.

In consumer behavior literature, we can find a number of related, yet distinct concepts. Ahuvia's (2005) notion of 'object-love' seems rather close to the emotional aspect of the concept of devotion. Drawing on Belk's (1988) notion of the extended self, Ahuvia maintains that the objects we love have a strong influence on our sense of who and what we are. Several authors (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988; Fournier 1998; Belk, 2003) have adopted a similar perspective with regard to the importance of loved objects to individual identity. Ahuvia (2005) extended these insights with his findings that love objects might also assist with symbolically demarcating the boundaries between the self and identities the consumer rejects. In other instances, they serve to support an identity that combines potentially conflicting aspects of self. Furthermore, particularly in connection with activities and consumption experiences, objects also serve the purpose of self-completion, personal growth, and renewal of the self (Schouten, 1991; Arnould and Price, 1993; Celsi et al., 1993).

Another related concept has been promoted by Belk et al., (2003). Consumer passion and desire is portrayed as a strong, highly emotional, captivating, and motivating force, which makes us want the particular object of desire. Hence, desire is defined as a highly emotional, positive *state*. Based on mimetic theory (Girard, 1977) and Foucault's work on strategies of modern governance (1984), Belk et al. (2003) describe desire as being deeply linked to the social world, its values and lifestyles. Belk et al.'s (2003)

findings reflect the passionate character of desire, fueled by danger and immorality, distance and inaccessibility, desire for otherness and sociality. Hence, desire is rather characterized by powerful feelings of urge, and lacks the notion of commitment.

In order to elaborate the two defining elements of devotion - emotional state and behavior - we will draw on literature on love and romantic relationships in psychology. Research findings on religious sensations, religious worship, and its manifestations should provide a theoretical foundation of the religious aspects of devotion. Furthermore, we want to draw attention to the fact that feelings and actions towards objects of devotion might take on various forms, just like in interpersonal love relationships.

### **Love and devotion in psychology**

Before love can grow out of a romantic relationship between two individuals both persons have to possess the ability to fall in love (Kernberg, 1995). They must be ready to idealize the partner and willing to enter into the commitment of an emotional relationship. Also reciprocal erotic desire is a prerequisite for love. Once, these circumstances are established, love ideally evolves towards an altruistic act of loving, where being able to give is more important than taking (Fromm, 1976). Love is seen by Fromm as a perpetual activity. According to him, it comprises four basic mutual elements: concern, responsibility, and respect for and knowledge of the object of the union.

Sternberg (1997) sees intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment as the three building blocks of love. Intimacy relates to closeness and bondedness in relationships, while passion stands for physical attraction and sexual desire. When looking at typical

behaviors and attitudes that make up intimacy in this construct, Fromm's basic elements of love can be recognized as sub-elements of Sternberg's intimacy.

Decision/commitment describes the conscious decision at the beginning of a relationship to love one's partner, and later on, the commitment to keep this love alive. The interplay of these three elements of love can result in eight different forms of love, stretching from non-love, to the most complete form, consummate love, depending on how extensively each component is present. Non-love is a state where none of the three components are present. In most of the love kinds, two components are dominant, while the third one is only weak or absent. Consummate love is the only kind of love that is a product of all three components (Sternberg, 1997).

As opposed to Sternberg's eight variations of love, Lee only determines six love styles (Lee, 1973). These love styles, basically, rest upon the same underlying elements, namely passion, intimacy and decision/commitment. Lee's three primary love styles (Eros, Ludus and Storge) find their equivalent in three of Sternberg's types of love. While Eros, which is the combination of passion, intimacy and commitment, equals Sternberg's consummate love, Ludus represents a state of love where commitment does not play a big role, just like Sternberg's romantic love. The third primary form, Storge, is a mixture of intimacy and decision/commitment in the absence of passion, equivalent to Sternberg's companionate love.

#### *Function and purpose of love (relationships)*

Erich Fromm (1976) sees romantic love as driven by a need to overcome the sense of separation. The perceived separation from the outer world occurs to humankind because we have evolved from an instinct-dependent being to rational homo sapiens. The mental

and physical unity with a beloved person can help us to get rid of this deep-seated disparity.

Djikic and Oatley (2004) present a second dominant approach to the purpose of love and romantic relationships that can be found in the literature. According to them love is supposed to add meaning and sense to our lives. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1994) follow this stream of reasoning, suggesting that romantic relationships should fill the life of those involved with sense and substance. Additionally, they argue that another significant purpose of love is to grant emotional stability and security. Ideal love relationships should foster the autonomous personality development of both partners ((Djikic and Oatley, 2004; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1994). In this case, the exchange among the partners leads to a process of self-reflection and self-discovery for both. As a positive relationship in this sense can only be established if both partners open up freely to each other, intimacy, self-disclosure, mutual understanding, and respect are essential (Djikic and Oatley, 2004; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1994; Fromm, 1976).

## **Love and devotion in theology**

### *Function and purpose of religions*

According to Erich Fromm (1976) religion serves as a frame and guideline for thinking and acting. It provides the individual with a means of orientation and an object of devotion. Religion offers a set of explanations and values which helps in making sense of what is going on around us. But religion also confronts us with something higher that is worthy of adoration. Whereas Max Weber also defines religion's main function as problem-solving, Sigmund Freud (1912) sees religion's primary purpose as providing

consolation, and granting security to those who feel lost and threatened in an increasingly complex and insecure environment.

Religious love, just like interpersonal romantic love, is derived from a deeply rooted human need to overcome the feeling of separation from the outer world (Fromm, 1956). The objects of devotion that religions place at their center allow the individual to build up mental and spiritual connection. This artificial bond to a higher being delivers the “lost” individual from his state of separation.

#### *Manifestations of religious devotion*

Religious devotion often reveals itself in the form of worship of objects or persons and religious rites (Giddens, 1991; Freud, 1912; Lévi-Strauss, 1963; Mol, 1979; Durkheim, 2001; Fromm, 1956). In primitive religions totems play a central role (Mol, 1979; Durkheim, 2001; Lévi-Strauss, 1963). Idols made of wood or clay in the shape of human bodies were believed to possess supernatural powers and therefore be appropriate for public and private adoration (Fromm, 1956). Today, religions still have sacred objects such as altars, shrines and relics. Representatives of a religion (e.g. saints, the pope, the Dalai Lama) are also venerated as object of religious devotion because they embody the values and beliefs of the religion (Martignetti, 1998; Nicholls, 1996). They serve as tangible objects towards which believers can direct their devotion (Mol, 1979; Forster and Ranum, 1982).

Rites constitute purposive acts associated with religious symbols (Durkheim, 2001; Giddens, 1991). Social rites are extremely numerous in primitive religions, including rites of passage, rites of initiation, ascetic rites, rites for sacrificing and rites for commemorating (Durkheim, 2001; Eliade, 1959; Mol 1979; van Gennep, 1960). In

Christianity, events like baptism, marriage or going to confession are common examples of rites (Forster and Ranum 1982). Rituals are either performed individually or as collective ceremonies (Giddens, 1991).

### *Religious aspects of love*

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1994) describe love as earthly religion, which contains a certain kind of utopia; just like religious systems. Both, love and religion, enable the experience of transcendence. While in the case of love, sexual sensation leads to transcendent moments, religion's transcendent aspect is determined by the belief that a higher powerful being exists. The conviction that a better life and a superior self are possible is the common foundation for individuals seeking love and religion.

## **SYNTHESIS**

The following section provides a synthesis comprised of the psychological underpinnings of love relationships, devotion as an emotional state, and the religious acts associated with consumer devotion.

### **“You light up my life” – the psychology of person-object relationships**

Similar to what Ahuvia (2005), Belk (2003), Belk et al. (1989), Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) have described, objects of love are a repository of meaning in life. They represent important means of identity-building. In order to give their lives meaning, consumers build up highly emotional, long-lasting relationships with love objects (Fromm, 1976; Fournier, 1998; Vézina, 1999; Shankar and Fitchett, 2002). They help people cope with complexity in life. Confronted with almost endless options of how to live one's life, and

with an unprecedented amount of things to consume and possess, love objects differentiate sheer consumption objects and valued objects from the ones we love and relate with. They provide a frame of reference, reflect our values system, and display our *Weltanschauung*.

Those objects are loved for what they do to the consumer, particularly in times of change. They are essential for the development and definition of one's identity. Human beings are confronted with various life tasks, current concerns, and times of transition (Fournier, 1989), which are waiting to be mastered. Objects can help us to overcome those challenges by physically and psychologically helping us to gain skills and perform better, giving us hope for the future. They are means for transformation and can help to overcome tensions between different identities. As reported by Belk (2003), for instance, high heeled shoes can help transform an insecure high school girl into an elegant and adorable lady (2003).

However, consumers do not necessarily become devoted to all objects that help in this respect. Research in psychology teaches us that love relationships are also characterized by a secure feeling, by reciprocity and unity. According to Fromm (1956, 1976), humans engage in religious practices and love relationships because of a deeply rooted human desire to overcome the feeling of being separated. Fournier (1998) has found similar brand relationships, which are characterized by the feeling that the other is irreplaceable.

A further reason to engage in those relationships is our striving for transcendental, spiritual experiences (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1994). Objects and persons may be mediators of such experiences and play a central role in an individual's spiritual life. From the literature on totemism (Mol, 1979; Forster and Ranum, 1982; Durkheim, 2001)

we know that individual totems are used as concrete objects to which the believers can direct their devotion.

### **“Is it love?” - devotion as an emotional state**

As Fournier (1998) has reported, consumers engage in various different forms of brand-relationships among which we also find feelings of love. Such relationships require the ability to idealize an object, which is an antecedent for desire. Hence, love objects are perceived in a somewhat distorted and idealized manner. Furthermore, in order to be loved, an object must fulfill the ‘personification qualification’ criterion, which enables an object to be perceived as an active partner, who can also reciprocate in a way (Fournier, 1998; Rozanski et al., 1999).

Whereas our intuition undoubtedly tells us how it feels to love and to be loved, love from a theoretical standpoint is a much more complex emotional state and encompasses many different forms. Passion and desire are often cited components of love (Hazan and Shaver, 1994; Sternberg, 1997; Kernberg, 1995; Fournier, 1998; Belk et al., 2003). Along with passion comes idealization and adoration of the beloved. The passionate component of devotion is responsible for the intensity of emotionality that comes with love however it does not reflect the intensity of love as such. Passion rather circumscribes the desire and (physical) attraction that is evoked by the object of love. Hence, passion and desire is to be understood as an important component of love, although not equivalent to love. Authors agree that love also implies a feeling of connectedness and intimacy (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1994; Fournier, 1998; Hazan and Shaver, 1994; Sternberg, 1997). Person-object relationships, therefore, are also very close and trustful, which necessitates that both partners are highly committed and

dedicated to this relationship. Dedication describes the conscious decision at the beginning of the partnership to keep this love alive. Passion and dedication are fueled by transcendent experiences, which are sought after in love relationships (Fromm, 1956, 1976; Belk, 1989; Kozinets, 1997, 2001; Pimentel and Reynolds, 2004; Scholes, 2004; Muniz and Schau, 2005). Those experiences make partners feel close to each other and uphold a certain intimacy, which is needed for love to gain substance.

Devotion as an emotional state can be described as a tripartite state of *passion*, *intimacy* and *dedication*, similar to Sternberg's triangle of love. Depending on the intensity of those three components, different facets and intensities of devotion might exist (Shimp and Madden, 1988). As described by Sternberg (1997) and Lee (1973), several love styles are possible, from non-love to consummate love, which we expect to exist in person-object relationships in a similar way. Acts of devotion perpetuate and refuel the loving feelings for the loved, sacred object.

### **“Loving you, loving me” – acts of devotion**

It is at the very beginning of a love relationship that individuals engage in a process of sacralization of the loved object, for instance by means of sacrifices, adoration and worshipping, rites and rituals, and objectification of the sacred. (see: Belk et al., 1989 for a comprehensive overview of sacralization processes). However, ecstatic as one might feel upon a first transcendental experience and loving feeling, this sacred status may soon be lost through habituation, forgetting, or encroachment of the profane (Belk, et al., 1989). Belk et al. (2003) provide important findings on the dynamics of consumer passion and desire. They report that desire is perpetuated through imagination, by dwelling on the love object and so intensifying our feelings. However as soon as we

possess the object of desire, it transforms into familiarity, and eventually boredom. Only our desire to desire, our fear of being without desire, and hope to be able to realize our desire eventually upholds this state.

As opposed to desire, devotion is characterized by a much more altruistic attitude, by responsibility, and dedication. Therefore, devoted individuals do not hesitate to sacrifice their time, money, and energy in order to maintain this intimate and passionate relationship. The religious zealotry of devoted individuals is exhibited by consumers who make such sacrifices, engage in consumer advocacy (Rozanski et al., 1999), and oppositional brand loyalty, as for instance described by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) or Pimentel and Reynolds (2004). Loyalty in words and deeds is a distinct element of consumer devotion. It reflects a voluntary emotional bond between an individual and a love object. From Ahuvia's (2005) work we have learned that love objects receive much attention and dedication from consumers rather than provide simple pleasures.

Individuals seem to put much energy in these objects, which makes them meaningful and helps integrate them into their sense of identity (2005). When put to the extreme, individuals even cease consuming and start producing their own love objects in an effort to achieve a state of individuation and self-realization (Hemetsberger, 2005). These objects are outcomes of 'labors of love' (Ahuvia, 2005; Hemetsberger, 2005) reflecting that 'pleasure can be bought, but love is made'.

We can also learn from Fromm (1976) that love involves knowing each other. Hence, devotees are eager to gain knowledge about their love object. Individuals dedicate a considerable part of their life to the things they love. We know from theology that individuals engage in rites, rituals, prayers, singing, fasting, adoration and worship. People travel to holy places, adore and worship spiritual leaders, collect things, build

altars and shrines, all which are sacred to them. Regarding love objects we are still unaware of much of the private rites and worshipping behavior. However, we know from introspection that we fast for *the* wedding gown, that we pray for good weather to be able to ride our bike, and that we caress and polish our cars. We even make pilgrimages to the Museum of Modern Art in order to see the original design of our love object. Whereas some behavior becomes public at some point, other devotional acts are kept private. Knowledge about private meanings of possessions is rich (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Richins, 1994), but we know much less about how individuals act upon love objects and keep this love alive, apart from public spheres.

#### **DISCUSSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

As developed in our synthesis, devotion conveys the meaning of love, close connectedness, and a religious form of zeal. From our discussion of the extant literature derives a tripartite, yet closely interwoven, concept of devotion encompassing *passion*, *intimacy*, and *dedication*. In future research, an investigation into the interplay among the three elements will provide important empirical underpinnings of consumer devotion, and provide a categorization of person-object relationships. Sternberg (1997) and Lee's (1973) love styles could serve as a starting point for an extension to objects and brands.

As with regard to the behavioral aspects of devotion, we should further look at the intimate and private acts of devotion and how they contribute to consumers' self-identity and personal growth. Acts of devotion might reflect particular forms and intensities of consumer-object relationships, which we don't know yet. A brand could facilitate and

support those acts of devotion, for instance by providing 'holy' places where the devotee can adore the brand; by facilitating private rituals; or by inviting devotees to create their own love object.

Devotees also show their dedication to their worshipped brand to others. Their role as ambassadors of the brand should not be underestimated. Being convinced of their object of devotion and its centrality in their lives, devotees share their opinion and feelings concerning the brand with others. Thus, they might influence potential consumers to the advantage or disadvantage of the brand. However, they might act differently in this respect as compared to other members of a brand community, because of their intimate, private relationship with the brand. Hence, future research is needed to clarify their role within a broader social context.

Considering that each partner in an interpersonal relationship has chosen his complement for good reasons, there might be specific characteristics in products or brands that increase their adequacy as object of devotion. Gender could make a difference regarding men and women's propensity to become devoted to different objects. Monga (2002) has already reported findings that men and women do not engage in brand relationships in the same way.

Investigations into the intensity of consumer devotion seem important as it could be both enriching and detrimental to consumers and consumer-brand relationships. Just like pathological forms of love exist in interpersonal relationships, pathological forms of devotion to a brand or product can emerge. Findings from research into compulsive consumption and addictive behavior show an increased vulnerability of individuals with a general addictive predisposition and low self-esteem to develop pathological forms of devotion (O'Guinn and Faber, 1989; Hirschman, 1992). We expect that an investigation

on the propensity of different human personalities to addictive forms of devotion will contribute to avoid potentially detrimental consequences.

A potential harm for consumers might also arise from a late awareness that there is a decisive difference between interpersonal relationships and relationships with objects. When love objects are treated as substitutes for human relationships, which are essential in human life, ethical concerns arise. If a brand cannot fulfill the expectations of the devotee, the devotee might not only quit the relationship but also feel abused, disrespected and betrayed by a brand. Hence, for one thing, as Holt (2002) maintains, brands need to be authentic. Additionally, encounters between brands and consumers should reflect respect and concern.

It might be challenging for consumers and companies to draw the line between an enriching devotional relationship with a brand and its pathological counterparts. Yet, we should not close our eyes before the potential perils of pulling consumers into such tight and personally challenging relationships with a brand. True and authentic brands should aim to contribute to a re-enchanted world and enable both, the consumer and the brand, to grow.

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