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"My Favorite Things": A Cross-Cultural Inquiry into Object Attachment, Possessiveness, and Social Linkage

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We explore the meaning and histories of favorite objects in two cultures using surveys and photographs. Favorite object attachment is differentiated from the possessiveness component of materialism and from attachment to other people. Meanings of favorite objects derive more from personal memories in the U.S. and from social status in Niger than from object characteristics. Since favorite objects serve as storehouses of personal meanings, gender, age, and culture reflect differences in object selected as well as reasons for selection. In the U.S., photographs show greater proximity to objects that are symbols of others or experiences than to objects enjoyed for their own attributes.

M aterial objects play many roles in social life. They provide sustenance, shelter, safety, and entertainment. They serve as tools to accomplish tasks. They provide mobility. They counterbalance the effects of nature by keeping us dry when nature is wet, warm when it is cold, cool when it is hot, shaded when it is too sunny, and in the light when it is too dark. For 50 years paleo-archaeologists have told us that material objects have helped us "make" ourselves as human beings (Childe 1936; Issac et al. 1979).

THINGS AND SELFHOOD

Objects serve as the set and props on the theatrical stage of our lives. They situate an individual's character or personality in a context (Goffman 1959; Holman 1980; Levy 1959; Mick 1986; Turner 1969). We use objects as markers to denote our characters for others; we also use objects as markers to remind ourselves of who we are. In this sense we derive our self-concept

from objects. That is, we use objects to convey and extend our self-concepts (Belk 1987a) to others as well as to demonstrate the self-concept to ourselves. Objects convey our connection to others and help express our sense of self (Levy 1981; McCracken 1986; Rook 1985).

For the most part, modern consumer research published in marketing has not examined directly the phenomenon of attachment to objects and the meaning of object ownership (Belk 1985) despite the interest of certain of its forebearers (Veblen 1899). It has, however, examined brand preference and brand loyalty (Jacoby and Chestnut 1978) and involvement (Bloch and Richins 1983), which all tie the individual to the brand or purchase context. Yet these topics focus on the acquisition and prepurchase phase of buying, rather than on ownership and consumption and their meanings to consumers. Because consumption is an important concept in understanding demand and consumer behavior generally, some researchers have begun to address questions of ownership and the meaning of consumption (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Levy 1981) and more macro issues such as product constellation meanings (Solomon and Assael 1987) and cultural brandscapes (Sherry 1986).

In anthropology, objects have usually been discussed in terms of their role in the production process or in gift exchange (Gregory 1982; Hyde 1983; Levi-Strauss 1979; Mauss 1967). Traditionally, the movement away from locally made material culture and the adoption of culturally alien objects was merely viewed as an inevitable, if regrettable, part of the acculturation process (Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Stout 1947; Wallendorf and Reilly 1983). More recent work has begun to clarify

531

the historical political-economic uses and meanings of objects among cultures of traditional anthropological interest (Appadurai 1986; Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Mintz 1979; Mukerji 1983; Society for Economic Anthropology 1986).

Collectively, the research on ownership in a number of fields leads us to contend that attachment to objects as symbols of security, as expressions of self-concept, and as signs of one's connection to or differentiation from other members of society is a usual and culturally universal function of consumption. The primary purpose of the work reported here is to conceptually and empirically explore the nature and meaning of the attachments people form to objects that they designate as special or favorite.

In the United States, the phenomenon extends to the infant's security blanket (Passman 1976; Passman and Adams 1981; Passman and Halonen 1979; Passman and Longeway 1982; Weisberg and Russell 1971). Such attachments develop very early and are common; preference for a favorite object has been found to exist in more than 70 percent of six-month old infants (Furby and Wilke 1982). The familiar blanket provides a psychological feeling of comfort quite apart from its utilitarian warmth-giving properties. It serves as a transition object enabling the child to move away from the security of parents and venture into the physical world.

Since objects carry a self-concept-based meaning, losing or severing our connection to objects nonvoluntarily can change the meaning of life for individuals. For example, Goffman (1961) has described the "stripping process" that occurs when individuals enter what he calls "total institutions," such as prisons or mental hospitals. Upon arrival, an individual's clothing and personal possessions are taken away. Institutional clothing and objects are issued for the person's use but are not under his or her full control. Thus, ownership of objects disappears as the institution takes on the role of providing objects for one's use. Connections to "normal" life on the "outside" are severed, and individuals gradually assume the dependent role of patient or prisoner. In practice, institutionalized persons find it difficult to claim or reclaim their "normalcy."

Institutionalized mentally retarded patients stripped of objects for maintaining self-definition often attempt to reverse the stripping process by acquiring objects that others ("normal people") define as useless, such as soiled wrapping paper and expired coupons (Carroll 1968). These objects then take on new meaning in differentiating the self from others. Patients attempt to appear "normal" to reestablish individuality, and to display connection to the outside world by collecting treasured "junk." Their behavior is considered inappropriate because they confer treasured status on objects most people consider rubbish (Thompson 1979).

Social scientists have found that when elderly people move into a nursing home, they feel a loss of status (Sherman and Newman 1977–78). To compensate or

attenuate this feeling, many bring with them a cherished object. Their strong attachment to this object is usually not based on its monetary value. Rather it holds symbolic value and provides a sense of security as well as continuity in one's link with others. In Mexico City, even deeply impoverished families cling to religious icons and use a shelf in their homes as an altar to symbolize their hopes for a better future in the afterlife (Lewis 1969).

Because objects serve as personal storehouses of meaning, losing all of one's material possessions is experienced as a tragedy and a violation of the self in America. The emergence of victim support groups and the felt inadequacy of safety nets like homeowner's or renter's insurance indicate how much we dread such losses. Loss of objects implies loss of "face" and status because the objects are a representation of self. (See Belk 1987a for an extended discussion of loss of possessions leading to a diminished sense of self.)

In summary then, a wide range of phenomena from the baby's unselfconscious attachment to objects to the trauma of loss through theft, catastrophe, or institutionalization indicates how important possessions are to the American sense of self. Data from other cultures provide comparable illustrations of the fundamental attachment between people and objects. Although the meaning of self differs cross-culturally and varies in its link with individualism (Hsu 1985), the fact that these conceptions of self are expressed to some degree through objects seems to be universal.

There are many examples from around the world of tribal peoples' wholesale, ingenuous embracing of western objects, which from a utilitarian viewpoint are completely out of place in the tribal context (Arnould and Wilk 1982). In the South Pacific in the wake of World War II, veritable "cargo cults" grew up as "big men" in tribal cultures sought to obtain western objects by supernatural means (Worseley 1968). Acculturation studies in the forties documented the apparently willing adoption of all manner of manufactured goods by nonwestern peoples (e.g., Stout 1947 on the San Blas Cuna), and the pages of National Geographic still contain pictures of naked tribespeople enjoying western consumables (e.g., Devillers 1983; Tweedie 1980; Wentzel 1978). Such attachment behaviors give expression to self-differentiation by drawing sharp contrast with the cultural context in which they are embedded.

The societal impact of loss has also been documented in tribal cultures. Famous case studies such as Metraux (1959) on Amazonia, Sharp (1968) on Australia, and Turnbull (1972) on Africa document the breakdown of societies and sociability when key objects in the material culture inventory were lost or replaced through the incursion of manufactures or money. In these cases, of course, loss is culture-wide rather than individual. Recently some work has attempted to compare cases, deciphering why some objects were accepted and some rejected by a culture, and why the loss of control over

only certain kinds of objects results in radical deculturation (Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Gregory 1982; Leach and Leach 1983; Strathern 1969).

A process similar to Goffman's "stripping" is characteristic of rites of passage in nonwestern ritual contexts. Initiates are often deprived of their possessions as they assume new social identities. During the ritual transformation, special objects and foods are designated for their use. Upon successful completion of the ritual transformation, initiates emerge usually with a new social identity, but frequently with new objects as well, such as tribal scars, a spear, a new hairstyle, or a new wrap (Farb and Armelagos 1980; Turner 1969; Van Gennep 1960).

From these diverse examples, it appears that attachment to and derivation of meaning from objects occurs among all peoples, including nomadic tribes that place a premium on mobility. For example, for the Samburu and the Nuer of East Africa, cattle take on a multilayered meaning. For cattle pastoralists, diverse values and notions about status ranks are intertwined in one type of object (Evans-Pritchard 1940; Goldschmidt 1969; Lincoln 1981; Verdon 1982). Among the !Kung San bushman tribes of Namibia and Botswana, multiple meanings are conveyed by beaded headbands. Weissner (1984) describes how band affiliation, degree of acculturation to surrounding Bantu custom, and even belief in the traditional behavioral norm of "walking softly" are conveyed through headband design elements.

In many cultures in the Third World, the number of commodities in circulation and the frequency and multiplicity of occasions for their exchange, consumption, and display have been more limited than in the West (Appadurai 1986). These cultures frequently compress multiple meanings into a few types of property, rather than into the many types of objects such as clothing (McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb 1982; Solomon 1983; Veblen 1899), automobiles (Evans 1959), homes and home furnishings (Davis 1955; Felson 1976; Kron 1983; Lynes 1980; Warner, Meeker, and Eels 1960), and foods (Farb and Armelagos 1980) used by Westerners for conveying such meanings.

In both Western and nonwestern cultures, attachment to particular favorite objects as symbols need not be viewed as something that is evil or bad, as has been the perspective toward the more general phenomenon of materialism taken by many religions (Belk 1983) and societal critics (Looft 1971; Wachtel 1983). Research on elderly Americans finds that individuals who lack cherished possessions have lower life satisfaction scores than those who have such objects (Sherman and Newman 1977–78). Specific object attachments need not take over the individual's orientation to life and develop into an all-consuming materialism or attachment to objects as in the case of fanatical collectors (Baudrillard 1968). Indeed, fierce competition to obtain *kula* armshells and necklaces, some of which have circulated for generations in the New Guinea archipelago, always entails their future exchange for different but equally valued markers of status and facilitates the extension of social networks rather than the expression of pure covetousness (Leach and Leach 1983; Malinowski 1922). Such objects permit individual differentiation and self-expression for a while, but the meaning of that self-expression is inextricably intertwined with connection to a larger group.

On the basis of the study of beaded headbands among the !Kung San, Weissner (1984) hypothesizes that objects fuel a universal dialectic of style through which three fundamental social processes are enacted: differentiation, comparison, and integration. Her views have been echoed by other scholars working in both Western and nonwestern contexts (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Kopytoff 1986). Although specific meanings differ in varying cultural contexts, consumption is an activity by which consumers create intelligibility in the world and make visible and stable the categories of culture as they experience them (Douglas and Isherwood 1979).

OBJECTIVES

This conceptual foundation leads us to four empirical research questions in our attempt to understand the meaning of individuals' cherished objects in two quite dissimilar cultures. First, the analysis attempts to clarify the nature of attachment to favorite objects for the two groups of respondents. Second, relationships between attachment to a specific favorite object and more general attachment phenomena are addressed. Respondents' levels of generalized possessiveness (a component of materialism as conceptualized and measured by Belk 1984) and their social linkages (cf. Bott 1971) were measured. The extent of overlap of each of these with favorite object attachment is then examined. The third research question involves cross-cultural comparisons of levels of favorite object attachment and the generalized possessiveness component of materialism. These results are presented in an attempt to determine cultural differences as reflected in these measures. Finally, the role of three components of society, which are also enduring and distinguishing components of self-concept, namely culture, age (Erikson 1959; Furby 1978; Neugarten 1969), and gender (Mead 1949; Tournier 1981), are examined to see how they structure and explain favorite object selection cross-culturally. Differences in these three components would be expected to be expressed through favorite objects. They should then be found to have not only strong and enduring linkages to self-concept, but also strong linkages structuring favorite object selection. Multiple methods are used to explore the experiential meaning and history of favorite objects as expressions of self (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Analysis focuses on understanding common and contrasting structures in informants' emic representations of meaning.

METHOD

Samples and Settings

In-home personal interviews were conducted with two samples of adults selected to cover variation in culture, socioeconomic group, and domestic group life cycle stage. Cultural differences were necessary to assess the generalizability of favorite object attachments as expressions of identity. Thus, two highly dissimilar cultures with respect to economic development, materialistic values, and breadth of opportunities for expression of self through objects were chosen. Within each culture, socioeconomic and domestic cycle diversity were desired to adequately capture intracultural, as well as intercultural variance.

The first sample, consisting of 300 adults, was drawn from a major Southwestern American city. The city is characterized by rapid immigration from other parts of the U.S. Most residences are of recent construction, characterized by open space plans with expansive views of the surrounding mountains. The local economy is service based and economic growth is tied to population growth. Consistent with the hot climate and western imagery, lifestyles tend to be casual rather than formal, and because most citizens are recent arrivals, they tend to be open rather than tradition-directed.

The other sample of 45 adults was drawn from the Hausa-speaking peasants living in three villages in Zinder province of the Niger Republic (Arnould 1984a). As part of ongoing ethnographic fieldwork, the second author obtained responses from the Nigerien sample using a similar semistructured interview. Difficulties of translation, sample member identification, the interview situation, and establishing rapport resulted in a smaller sample size for the Nigerien group.

Niger is landlocked in the African Sahel and was a site of severe drought from 1969–1973 and again in 1983. Located in the center of Niger, Zinder province lies to the north of the Hausa market centers in Nigeria. Victim to the pattern of regional, sectoral, and social disarticulation typical of peripheral capitalist development in Africa (Amin 1973, 1976; de Janvry 1981), Zinder's fragile modern economy has never recovered from the collapse of the export-oriented peanut trade in the early 1970s (Franke and Chasin 1980). In 1985–1986, cereal prices were comparable to those in 1977–1978 and prices of many rural handicrafts had hardly changed in that time. Although there is a lively periodic market system (Arnould 1985), there is nonetheless little scope for capital accumulation or discretionary consumption. The economy has been characterized as one condemned to economic involution (Arnould 1984b).

Despite regional, occupational, ethnic, and class differences, Islam is "culturally rooted" in daily life. Unlike Judeo-Christian religions, the Islamic tradition makes no distinction between religious, civil, and criminal law (Schact 1964). In the Islamic conception of

property, limited use rights, as distinct from full ownership, are commonly recognized (Schact 1964). Proscriptions on usury co-exist with a strong value of investment in trade, livestock, and urban real estate. In Zinder, fidelity to the practice of almsgiving and belief in the dignity of poverty co-exist with the notion that wealth brings happiness and the near homology in day-to-day life between the status of bourgeois and that of pilgrim to Mecca (Hausa, masc. *elhadji;* fem. *hadjiya*).

A typical household's compound in rural Zinder includes a round thatch or adobe thatch-roofed hut for each adult wife. A wealthy man may also build himself a square adobe house used to entertain male visitors and as a storehouse. Floors are of sand; doors are of corrugated metal or matting. Clothes are usually hung on the wall, although some people have cheap valises or metal trunks. Houses are simply furnished with a bed and palm fiber or plastic mats. Rich people possess a prayer rug or woven hangings. There may be a small kerosene lamp. Outside there is often a small area for tethering goats and sheep. Women cook in the courtyard on a tripod of stones using clay and gourd vessels and wooden, gourd, and tin utensils. Enamelware food preparation and serving dishes are now commonplace. Tools (mortars and pestles, axes, hoes, a bucket, a flashlight, and knives are most common) and small wooden stools are often scattered around. Thus, both economically and materially, life in Zinder is quite a contrast to life in the Southwestern United States.

Ethnic subpopulations represented in the two samples were too small to allow subanalysis. Census data for the American sample and fieldworker knowledge of population composition for the Nigerien sample permit us to claim that the populations were representative in terms of key demographics such as gender, income, age, and, where appropriate, home ownership and education.

Data Collection Methods

Three methods of data collection were employed: surveys, photographs, and focus group interviews. For most of the concepts of interest, self-report measures were deemed appropriate. However, for the primary concept of interest—nature of attachment to the favorite object—an approach employing more than one method (Campbell and Fiske 1959) was used. For Southwest American respondents, two methods of data collection were employed: (1) individuals were asked questions about their favorite object, and (2) individuals were photographed with their favorite object.

As suggested by Wagner (1979) and Collier (1967), the use of photographs in social science should go beyond merely using photos as illustrations (cf. Danforth 1982; Lynes 1980; Susman 1973). The photographic materials should be coded to become raw data for analysis (cf. Felmlee, Eder, and Tsui 1985; Rheingold and Cook 1975), an approach that is receiving increasing

attention in consumer research (cf. Belk 1987b; Heisley and Levy 1987; Heisley, McGrath, and Sherry 1987; Wallendorf and Westbrook 1985). The photos in this study became raw data through structured analysis (Collier and Collier 1986) of the physical relation between the respondent and the favorite object. Close physical proximity was taken to indicate a high level of attachment to the object (Mershon 1985). This is similar to other research in which physical proximity has been used as an unobtrusive measure of social connection and structure between racial groups (Campbell, Kruskal, and Wallace 1966), within peer groups (Feshbach and Feshbach 1963; Hall 1969), in families (Milgram 1977), and in field studies of animals (Imanishi 1960).

In this project, the physical proximity between the respondent and the favorite object in the photographs was coded using a five-point scale. The coding was done with one coder on two occasions, and once by another coder. Intrarater reliability was 0.90; interrater reliability with two coders was 0.93. These levels meet reliability criteria established by Nunnally (1967). This analysis uses the average of the three codings of each photograph.

In Niger also, two methods of data collection were employed: (1) individuals were asked about their favorite objects as in the Southwest, but in addition, (2) focus-group interviews were employed to discuss patterns of introduction and diffusion of items identified as recent popular introductions into the local material culture inventory. Information necessary to place responses in context has been collected over a number of years using a variety of ethnographic methods (Arnould 1984a).

Both samples were administered an interview schedule originally developed for the U.S. but also adapted to the cultural and linguistic situation of Niger. In Niger, the questions were translated into the Hausa language. However, this was not sufficient for rendering them culturally and contextually appropriate. Although it introduces nonparallel methods in the two cultures, some scaling and meaning changes were made. For example, for the Americans, frequency of talking with others on the phone was a scale item used in measuring social linkages. In Niger, other forms of social communication were included such as attending village association meetings, eating with friends, and sharing Moslem thanksgiving. Thus, cultural appropriateness was given priority over linguistic equivalence in scale construction. As part of the interview, respondents were asked a series of questions to identify possessive attitudes towards possessions in general, to explore the extent and importance of social linkages, and to identify a favorite object.

In the sample drawn from the American Southwest, the choice of objects was confined to the living room. This limitation enables greater comparability of the commonalities of expression through favorite objects between the Nigeriens and the more possession-rich Americans. This area of the house is one which is the most public and therefore the most involved in impression management in American culture (Goffman 1959). It is designed to present to others our sense of ourselves and our personalities (Baudrillard 1968; Kron 1983). Laumann and House state that "the living room reflects the individual's conscious and unconscious attempts to express a social identity" (1970, p. 323). In short, we would expect to find favorite objects that are expressions of some important aspects of the self in American living rooms.

Kron (1983) recognizes that there is greater female than male influence over the American living room. Restricting choice to the living room could produce gender differences in degree of attachment to objects chosen. However, since the living room is more gender neutral than other areas of the house (e.g., kitchen and bedroom), it was selected as the best area for containing both male and female expressions of social identity.

In Zinder, respondents were simply asked to name any favorite object with no restriction of location applied to their choice. The justification is that the scope of consumption for these rural people is simplified in comparison to that of Americans. And since the notion of finely graded responses is culturally unfamiliar, the respondents were asked to rate their liking for the favorite object on a four- rather than seven-point Likert scale as used with the Americans.

RESULTS

Forms of Attachment

Possessiveness. Although the primary focus in this study is attachment to a specific object, the relation between this form of attachment and other more general expressions of attachment was also of interest. The component of materialism that is a general attachment to possessions has been termed "possessiveness." A nine-item summed scale to measure possessiveness (seven items in Niger), which has been demonstrated to have fair reliability, convergent validity, and criterion validity in U.S. cultural settings (Belk 1984, 1985) was employed to ascertain the respondent's more general attachment to all material possessions. This scale includes items addressing general attachment toward all of one's possessions as well as control over possessions and feelings concerning loss of possessions. However, the scale items do not focus on attachment to specific possessions or what are termed "favorite objects" in the current work. Some changes were made in the scale items to render them contextually appropriate in Niger, although they remain conceptually comparable to the original scale utilized in the American sample.

Because the scales for generalized possessiveness are different in the two cultures, for comparison, the means for each culture were transformed to standardized scores by dividing by their standard deviations. This resulted

EXHIBIT 1

PERSON ATTACHMENT SCALE ITEMS AND FACTOR LOADINGS
FOR THE AMERICAN SAMPLE

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Frequency of entertaining others in the home[a]	−.03	.63	−.09
Frequency of talking with others on the phone[a]	−.002	.51	.24
Marital attachment[b]	−.64	.10	.19
Number of people in the household	.81	−.12	.01
Number of financially dependent children	.08	.02	.01
Number of relatives living in same town	.19	−.01	−.45
Number of club memberships	.04	.03	.20

[a] Five-point scale where 1 = never, 5 = frequently.
[b] Ordinal scale to reflect strength of marital attachment using demographic information: 1 = married, 2 = widowed, 3 = separated, 4 = divorced, 5 = never married.

in standardized group scores of 4.01 (raw s.d. = 2.65) for the Nigeriens and 4.62 (raw s.d. = 4.49) for the Southwest Americans. A t-test of these standardized group scores revealed differences that are statistically significant at the 0.0001 level ($t = 3.79$, df = 344). These findings suggest that Americans are substantially more materialistically possessive than are the Nigeriens. This should not be surprising. The major consumption goal of Zinderois elicited in surveys (Crow and Henderson 1979; Republique du Niger 1985) remains nutritional self-sufficiency. In contrast to the American consumers, Zinder's consumers have not yet been taught to consume and how much to consume "the good life" by market mediated consumption and mass media advertising (Belk and Pollay 1985).

Social Linkage. Also of interest is the individual's attachment to other people. One might wonder whether attachment to favorite objects can fill the void of alienation from other people. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) found, however, that individuals who claimed not to be materialistic because they did not have things that had special meaning for them also lacked special close friendships and relationships. Those who had strong ties to other people represented these ties in special material objects.

Social network linkage was measured in a summed scale of factor scores for seven items in the U.S. sample and thirteen in the Nigerien sample. The items were selected to reflect common ways individuals maintain strong attachments to other people. The items employed in the U.S. sample include frequency of entertaining others in the home, talking with friends on the phone, marital attachment, number of people in the household, number of financially dependent children, number of relatives living in the same town, and number of club memberships. In Niger, some culturally irrelevant items were deleted while other items were added, including

EXHIBIT 2

PERSON ATTACHMENT SCALE ITEMS AND FACTOR LOADINGS
FOR THE NIGERIEN SAMPLE

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
kana zuwa abinci gidan wane, kuna ciyyaya? (Frequently eats with friends)	.03	.02	.15
in kana da lokaci kana so kullum ka ziyarci abokai? (Would more often visit friends)	.01	.43	.63
abokanka suna zuwa ziyartarka kullum? (Frequently receives guests)	.04	−.58	.30
in ana kirin taro kana zuwa kullum? (Frequently attends village association meetings)	.09	.44	.27
a ganinka, yara dole ne su bi asbin da iyaye yya ke so? (Children should obey their parents)	.70	.07	.02
bak'an magan ba ta tadama hankalinka? (Sensitivity to village gossip)	−.22	.69	−.34
kana ziyarten yan'uwa ko abokankai na garuruwan kewaye da ku? (Frequently travels to other villages to visit family/friends)	.15	−.07	.64
a ganinaka akwai wayyandan suka finka tsaregan jama'a a garin na? (Others are more suspicious than I)	.03	.74	.33
kana yarda da raiwon mutanen nan garin? (Agreement with local custom)	.76	−.19	.16
ka biye da raiwon mutanen nan garin? (Follows local custom)	.91	.00	−.06
kana yarda ka bar ra'ayinka ka dauki na jama'a? (Better to share others' opinions than to preserve one's own)	.31	−.35	.01
a wane gida ka samu naman layya bana? (Number of persons with whom I shared Moslem thanksgiving in 1985)	.05	.13	.19
mutanen nawa kawa tufan salla? (Number of persons for whom I purchased Moslem thanksgiving garments)	−.13	−.03	.75

number of persons entertained on a major festive occasion, attendance at village moots, and sensitivity to gossip (see Exhibits 1 and 2 for comparisons).

These items were factor analyzed and varimax rotation was used on the principal factors. In the U.S. sample, three factors were extracted with eigenvalues greater than 1 accounting for 58 percent of the variance in these divergent human contact items (see Exhibit 1). In the Niger sample, although five factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 accounted for 67 percent of the variance, only the first three were used, given the limited sample size ($n = 45$) and the relatively large number of items included in the analysis (13). These three factors have eigenvalues larger than 1.5 and account for 48 percent of the variance (see Exhibit 2). Since the present

work is not attempting to empirically decompose social linkage, but rather is examining its more molar overall relation to favorite object attachment, factor scores were summed across the three factors for an overall measure of person attachment. Because different scale items were used in the two samples, cross-cultural statistical comparisons of social network density are not appropriate.

Favorite Object Attachment. In the portion of the questionnaire dealing with favorite objects, one question addressed degree of attachment to the favorite object. In the U.S. sample, this was a seven-point Likert scale item; in the Nigerien sample, this was a four-point coding of reported attachment. We recognize that such a measure should be somewhat skewed given the self-selection of objects that hold favorite status; the scale was used only for cross-cultural comparison of the extremes of expressed attachment. That is, this scale indicates the maximal degree to which an individual invests the self in an object. Since one was a seven- and the other a four-point scale, the group means were transformed for comparability by dividing by their standard deviations, resulting in means of 3.72 for the Nigeriens (raw s.d. = 0.72) and 4.28 for the Southwest Americans (raw s.d. = 1.35). A t-test of the difference between these standardized group means for attachment to favorite object was statistically significant ($t = 3.52$, df $= 344, p < 0.0001$). Thus, on average, the U.S. sample is more strongly attached to their favorite objects than is the Nigerien sample.

Relationships Among Favorite Objects, Possessiveness, and Social Network Linkage. The relationships between degree of attachment to favorite object (measured verbally and photographically), possessiveness, and social network linkage are shown in Table 1 as measured by Pearson correlation coefficients. There is little consistent empirical overlap among these three types of attachment across the two samples. In the U.S. sample, generalized possessiveness bears a weak negative relationship with self-reported attachment to favorite object ($r = -0.15, p = 0.05$). Conversely, in the Nigerien sample, generalized possessiveness bears a weak positive relationship to self-reported attachment to favorite object ($r = 0.28, p = 0.028$). Overall, there is evidence for a substitution effect of favorite object for possessiveness in the Southwest American sample, but a collaborative effect in the Nigerien sample. However, these relations are sufficiently weak to claim that generalized possessiveness and favorite object attachment are conceptually and empirically separable. Although they are weakly correlated empirically, it appears that neither is merely an expression of the other. Favorite object attachment is not strongly related to generalized possessiveness or attachment to other people. Since these are distinct phenomena, favorite object attachment requires additional contextual analysis to specify its nature in particular cultural contexts.

TABLE 1

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN FORMS OF ATTACHMENT

	Attachment to favorite object (photographic display)	Posses-siveness	Person attachment
Attachment to favorite object (verbal report)	.03	−.15ᵃ .29ᵇ	−.01 −.20
Attachment to favorite object (photographic display)		−.008	−.06
Possessiveness			.005 −.30

ᵃ $p \leq 0.05$.
ᵇ Scores in the first row are for the Southwestern sample, those in the second row for the Nigerien sample. Photographs were not taken of the Nigerien sample.

Overall Meanings of Favorite Objects

Respondents in both cultures provided insights into their lives when they explained why they liked a particular object. When respondents were asked why they chose a particular object as their favorite, they did not focus on functionally based performance attributes. For roughly 60 percent of the American sample ($n = 171$) the reasons given reflected attachments based upon personal memories. The object was a favorite because it was a reminder of a friend or family member, a vacation trip, or an event in the respondent's past. For 6 percent of the U.S. sample ($n = 18$), the object was a favorite because it reminded the respondent of the person who had made it, typically as a gift. The meaning of these objects, then, often derives from symbolic person, event, and maker attachments rather than from their physical attributes. This is not surprising since 45 percent of the U.S. respondents received their favorite object as a gift, indicating the unique meaning of objects selected and given as gifts (Caplow 1984; Sherry 1983). Like the infants who do not choose blankets that are physically similar to their own security blankets (Weisberg and Russell 1971), adults layer meanings on objects that do not derive from physical features, as with souvenirs and tourist photographs (MacCannell 1976).

Some U.S. respondents chose functional (rather than display) objects such as chairs or clocks (see Table 2). Nevertheless, the reason given for these attachments typically derives from a shared history between the person and the object, such as between the television character of Archie Bunker and "his" chair. This history is not purchased with the object. After years of use, the web of semiotic and symbolic associations spun around the object by which it becomes decommodified and "singularized" for the individual (Kopytoff 1986) come to be the reasons for its selection as a favorite object.

TABLE 2

TYPE OF FAVORITE OBJECT BY SOUTHWEST
AMERICAN GENDER GROUPS

Type of favorite object	Total sample	Females	Males
Functional (chair, clock)	24	16	32
Entertainment (stereo, TV)	21	19	24
Personal items (knick-knacks)	14	18	10
Art piece (painting, poster)	10	7	12
Representational (photograph)	8	12	4
Plants and other living things	8	5	11
Handicraft (afghan, macrame)	8	12	5
Antique (hutch, tea cup)	6	9	3
Total	100	100	100
	n = 298	n = 148	n = 150

NOTE: Numbers are in percent; columns may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding. $X^2 = 39.2$ with 7 df.; statistically significant at $p < 0.001$.

Favorite objects serve as beacons or guideposts to orient the individual in, and personalize, both space and time.

When respondents selected favorite objects that were coded as art objects (a broad category including small figures and posters as well as paintings), they seldom did so because of the object's aesthetic value. Rather, Southwest Americans often indicated that art or aesthetic objects were selected because they served as reminders of an experience (such as a trip or former residence) or person.

American liking of art objects received as gifts speaks to a contradiction between integration and differentiation in the meaning of goods in industrial society. Consumer goods that are mass-produced and by definition homogeneous are a cultural vehicle for the expression of integration. Americans strive for shared ideal lifestyles through consumption of mass-produced products, as represented in the "Pepsi Generation," "Chevy trucks are the heartbeat of America," or through the collection of homogeneous series such as supermarket tableware, cutlery, and encyclopedias. At the same time, the need to realize one's individuality impels Southwesterners to reach for visible symbols of differentiation, and the singular object with which to encode this. Unlike mass-produced uniqueness ("BMW: the ultimate driving machine"), art objects (particularly exotic ones like German beer steins and Oriental carpets) help individuals express differentiation. Favorite objects, then, often serve simultaneously to express integration and differentiation.

Differences in the meanings of favorite objects are important to the respondents. Those Southwest Americans who indicated either a personal or maker-based reason for favorite object attachment had a higher self-reported liking of it than did those who indicated an object-based reason for attachment ($t = 1.73, p = 0.09$).

Symbolic representation of personal connections in favorite objects appears to enhance people's liking of the object as it takes on deeper meaning. Similarly, those U.S. respondents who indicated either a personal or maker-based reason for favorite object attachment scored higher on the person attachment scale than did those with an object-based reason for attachment ($t = 2.29, p = 0.023$). Those with strong ties to other people often represent those ties in favorite objects. They tend to mention these ties rather than object characteristics when asked why that object is their favorite. Seen from another angle, even—or perhaps especially—in our highly commodified environment, person-connected consumers often chose handcrafted favorite objects, which are by nature easier to "singularize" and "decommodify" (Kopytoff 1986) in the interests of personal cultivation (McCracken 1986).

In contrast, in Niger two respondents could not be induced to name a favorite object. Furthermore, to evoke responses from informants other than "my fields," "my children," or among Islamic adepts "my Koranic studies," often required some probing from the interviewer. These results reflect the more limited degree to which adult Nigeriens, as compared with U.S. respondents, establish their identities through market-mediated goods. These results also call into question the cultural universality of a Western conception of materialism, a point which will be discussed in greater detail later.

The reasons for attachment to particular favorite objects in Niger differed from the reasons given by the Americans. Surprisingly, only 15 percent indicated that functional utility was an important factor in preference. In Zinder, what we would term sentimental value through association with a loved one is likewise only a minor factor. Only 9 percent of the responses indicated that the object derived its meaning and value from its association with a family member through inheritance. Instrumental efficacy of some kind seems to underlie many kinds of preference in Niger. For example, 17 percent of the Nigerien responses indicated that part of the value of favored possessions derived from their exchange value, that is from their convertability to cash. Just over 19 percent indicated that the object's spiritual and/or magical efficacy was responsible for the person's attachment to it. Finally, 8 percent indicated that the object's prestige value was the reason for its selection as a favorite object.

The object's aesthetic value, or its auto-erotic quality (Hyde 1983; Rook 1985) also emerged as a factor in the Nigeriens' choice of object. Nearly 16 percent cited this as a reason for selecting the favorite object. However, the conventional nature of the objects underscores the role of culture in the transfer of auto-erotic meaning between persons and objects (McCracken 1986).

In eliciting attitudes towards possession and loss, Nigerien informants were quick to qualify remarks that might indicate great attachment to objects. While theft

makes people "hot" (Hausa, *zafi*), the loss of possessions is expected to be borne with patience (Hausa, *hakuri*). One informant expressed concern that if he amassed too many possessions, they might be lost and wasted through divine intervention.

Nigerien attitudes towards possessions are clarified with interpretive contextual data. Periodic droughts regularly reduce consumption decisions to the problem of obtaining adequate food, clothing, and shelter. Against the backdrop of Islamic attitudes towards property, the search for psychological well-being through discretionary consumption in Niger is further constrained both by the limited agricultural productivity and state economic policy. Direct and indirect taxation (e.g., contributions to festivals and dignitaries) and cheap food policies limit peasant purchasing power (de Janvry 1981; Olivier de Sardan 1984; Watts and Bassett 1986). Distortions in regional development patterns and the exchange rate drain human and monetary capital out of Zinder into Nigeria (Evans 1977). As a result, rural Nigeriens are not socialized to choose among a plethora of alternate material sources of satisfaction as are Southwest Americans.

Material satisfaction in the countryside entails dependence upon or power over other people (Baier 1974, 1976; Kirk-Green 1974). Zinder is an economy and a culture (cf. Hyde 1983) in which personal well-being is measured not solely in wealth in objects, but in the ability to give and to compel persons to reciprocate. Exchanges between kin of clothing, items of adornment, or other possessions, even favored ones, are commonplace. Annual tithes are paid to persons in positions of both religious and secular authority.

Taken together, findings from the two samples recall those of Myers (1985) and of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981). The latter note that the assignment of meaning to objects is flexible since it does not derive from the physical characteristics of the object. Like dialectical variation in language, the same object will have different meanings to different people because of its different associations to them. These authors state that "things are cherished not because of the material comfort they provide, but for the information they convey about the owner and his or her ties to others" (1981, p. 239). Our work shows that these individual nuances of meaning are overshadowed by cultural differences in the meaning not only of objects but of possessiveness itself.

Gender and Favorite Objects

Differences between men and women in their selection of favorite objects exist in both samples. As shown in Table 2, U.S. women are more likely than men to choose handicrafts, antiques, and representational items such as photographs of family members. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to choose art pieces, functional items, and plants and other living things. The

TABLE 3

TYPE OF FAVORITE OBJECT BY NIGERIEN GENDER GROUPS

Type of favorite object	Males	Females
Marriage/Domestic goods (jewelry, hangings, beds)	4	85
Religious/Magical items (Koran, liturgical texts, charms)	46	0
Livestock	19	4
Tools	8	5

NOTE: Numbers are in percent.

overall relation between gender and type of favorite object among Southwest Americans as tested by a X^2 test was statistically significant at $p = 0.001$.

In Zinder, gender is also strongly related to the type of favorite object selected (see Table 3). Commonly named favorite objects were religious books, including copies of the Koran. They were named by 22 percent of informants, and exclusively by men. Men indicate that they value these objects for their instrumental value, either as a (spiritual) link with the divine or as a (magical) agent of protection against ill-wishers or evil spirits. Men's favorite possessions, including religious books, charms, swords, and horses, are virtually all symbolic of real or desired authority over persons or the spiritual world.

Other frequently named items included machine or handwoven tapestries (32 percent). The former feature "Hindu" scenes or scenes of Mecca. The latter are traditional strip weavings in form, but today typically incorporate the Nigerien national colors (orange, white, green) or emblems. Next in frequency came silver jewelry (15 percent), including massive bracelets or necklaces of "Zinder crosses." Both types of items were named exclusively by women. Cultural ideals of beauty, notions of prestige, and association with senior female relatives were all linked to these items. These items are usually given to brides upon marriage. They are commonly employed in competitive displays between women on major religious holidays or during household life crisis rituals (baptisms and marriages). Thus, these items are symbolic of women's connections to women, both through kinship and informal politics.

In both cultures, women frequently chose items made for or given to them by others, antiques or heirlooms that tie them to previous generations, and representational items (e.g., photos) depicting their children, spouses, and grandchildren. Yet, in the Zinder sample, the relation between gender and social linkage ($r = -0.31$, $p = 0.02$), indicates greater density of men's social networks. This finding may be explained by scale construction for social linkage and the gender roles specified in this Moslem culture. In Niger, men's social networks tend to be more extended than women's, since they have greater freedom of movement. Women's networks are comprised of stronger, more private ties.

TABLE 4

TYPE OF FAVORITE OBJECT BY SOUTHWEST AMERICAN AGE GROUPS

Type of favorite object	Total sample	Age groups					
		18–24	25–35	36–44	45–54	55–64	65+
Functional	24	31	25	21	24	0	15
Entertainment	21	20	28	18	6	20	34
Personal items	14	9	11	11	24	20	31
Art piece	10	7	6	19	15	20	0
Representational	8	9	6	8	9	20	8
Plants and other living things	8	11	10	0	9	10	0
Handicraft	8	9	7	11	9	0	15
Antique	6	4	6	11	0	10	0
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
	n = 298	n = 45	n = 114	n = 62	n = 33	n = 10	n = 13

NOTE: Numbers are in percent; columns may not sum to 100 percent due to roundings. X^2 = 54.1 with 35 df.; $p < 0.01$.

Men's connections, expressed through gift exchanges external to the household and village, are best captured by the scale. Yet women's favorite objects are more expressive of social connections. In the two settings then, men most often chose craftgoods and artworks to represent ideals, functional objects to depict levels of comfort they have obtained, and religious texts, charms, plants, and pets to demonstrate their mastery over nature.

These findings of gender differences are consistent with previous research. Sherman and Newman (1977–78) found that elderly men and women were equally likely to have a cherished possession. However, they differed in what they cherished. Women chose photographs, while men chose what were called consumer items. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) interpret similar findings as indicating that cherished possessions of American women serve to maintain a network of social ties. Women's role in maintaining social ties through gift-giving in America has been noted previously (Caplow 1984).

Regardless of type of object chosen, women and men differ in their degree of attachment to their favorite objects. Using a self-report seven-point scale, U.S. women indicate a higher level of liking or attachment to favorite objects than do men (mean for women = 5.98, mean for men = 5.61, t = 2.38, p = 0.018). Although both were instructed to select their favorite objects, women report a higher level of liking for the object than do men. However, in Zinder, the four-point scale showed no significant difference between genders in the level of liking for a favored object. As noted earlier, these gender differences may be an artifact of locationally constraining object choice in the U.S.

Age and Favorite Objects

Age also mediates the relation between the individual and favorite object, but the overall relation is weaker

than that for gender (see Table 4). As Southwest Americans age, they are less likely to choose functional as opposed to display items as favorite objects. In both cultures, as adults age, they acquire social history that appears to be represented in objects. Younger people are in a life phase focused on accumulation of the functional items needed for independent living and expression of the emerging self (Wells and Gubar 1966). They appear to focus more on hedonic pleasures than on the maintenance of intergenerational ties.

In the U.S. sample, the tendency to select an art object as a favorite object increases with age. This may be interpreted as indicating that as individuals age, they seem to establish a sense of purpose in life and a set of ideals that are expressed in a favorite piece of art. Similarly, representational objects are often selected by older Americans to show intergenerational ties with one's progeny and spouse. The life review process of the elderly culminating in ego integration (Erikson 1959) involves a reflection on one's life. In this stage of life, family photographs arranged in secular "shrines" make tangible the success and fulfillment found through one's family of procreation.

Entertainment items are chosen as favorite objects by all U.S. age groups, although the type of objects differ. Younger people chose stereos as their connection to the music and beat of their age cohort. A number of middle-aged women chose the pianos that their children played during childhood. These women, who seldom play the piano, apparently use the piano as a symbol of children and their accomplishments. In fact, in many homes the research photographs show the piano transformed from a musical instrument into a secular altar on which children's and grandchildren's photographs are displayed as a means of memorializing and recalling the memory of one's children's music and the (real or imagined) happiness and family togetherness at that stage in the domestic cycle. Older Southwestern Americans who chose entertainment objects typically chose a television

TABLE 5

REASONS FOR ATTACHMENT TO FAVORITE OBJECTS BY
SOUTHWESTERN AMERICAN AGE GROUPS

Age	Personal and maker attachment (n = 156)	Object based attachment (n = 102)
18–24 (n = 45)	53	47
25–35 (n = 106)	60	40
36–44 (n = 55)	60	40
45–54 (n = 30)	63	37
55–64 (n = 10)	60	40
65+ (n = 12)	83	17
Total sample	60	40

NOTE: Numbers are in percent.

set. They often mentioned that it brought the world into their homes. For some with restricted mobility, contact with other humans was one-way, vicarious contact via the television set.

Among Southwest Americans, as age increases, there was an increase in the mention of personal and maker attachment reasons and a decrease in the mention of object-based characteristics as the reason for selecting the item (see Table 5). This tendency accords with the interpretation that age increases one's inclination to represent social history in a favorite object.

However, the data do not indicate that degree of attachment to favorite objects increases with age. In fact, Erikson's (1959) interpretation of life span development sees the psychological task of the elderly as acceptance of life as it was and acceptance of the inevitability of death. This would imply that the elderly might exhibit a gradual detachment from material objects in general and favorite objects in particular. This detachment process is indirectly reflected in the findings of this research in two ways. Among Americans, length of favorite object ownership increases with each age group up to the 55–64 age group. However, it then sharply turns down (one-way ANOVA $F = 6.5$, $p < 0.0001$). The means for the 55–64 and 65 and older age groups show a statistically significant difference from each other ($t = 2.65$, $p = 0.015$), although other adjoining age groups do not show such differences. These findings are consistent with research on the more generalized phenomenon of materialism, which shows that materialism bears a curvilinear relation to age, peaking in middle age (Belk 1986). Is the oldest group gradually parting with favorite objects, perhaps by passing them on to their children or grandchildren prior to the time of death? The question merits further study.

A second indication of the impact of aging on people's relation to their favorite objects is indicated by the seven-point scale probing degree of liking of the favorite object. The mean on this question was high ($\bar{x} = 5.8$, s.d. = 1.4), as should be expected. However, mean responses vary by age group. Favorite object liking in-

creases with age until 65, then declines sharply (one-way ANOVA $F = 2.6$, $p = 0.02$). Between the five age groups from 18–24 through 55–64, as age increases, liking of the favorite object increases. However, in moving from 55–64 into the 65 and older age group, liking of the favorite object declines to its lowest level. The difference between these two adjacent age groups is statistically significant ($t = 2.24$, $p = 0.04$). This is consistent with Sherman and Newman's (1977–78) finding that the old-old (those over 75) are less likely to have a cherished possession than the young-old (those 65–75).

In Zinder, age also exerts an effect on the relation between individuals and favored objects, although the overall relation is secondary to that of gender. Younger people focus more on their hedonic pleasures within a cultural age-related dialectic, even though the possibility of realizing individual hedonic pleasure through market-mediated consumption is a recent phenomenon in Niger.

For example, young brides-to-be (ages 13 to 16), lacking the experience to make deliberative consumption decisions on the basis of comparison of functional attributes of products, nonetheless play an innovative role through their expressed desires regarding the bridal trousseau. Because they are allowed whimsy and spontaneity in their prenuptial status, their requests for novel consumption goods are honored. Thus cheap quartz watches, which otherwise have no place in Hausa life, have taken their place among the objects of adornment (*kayan ado*) suitable for giving in marriage.

The unprecedented number of products recently introduced into the dowry is indicative of profound changes in Zinder's economic culture. Like other apparent absurdities in Third World consumption of decontextualized western objects (Arnould and Wilk 1982), they symbolize both a recognition of the authority and power of occidental civilization and a loosening of formal strictures on the statuses to which peasants may aspire (Baudrillard 1968). Dowry, extended from the bride's family to the husband's, is unlike bridewealth, which is extended from the husband's to the wife's. Though the gifts given may be the same, bridewealth here is a form of gift exchange with all its implications of reciprocity and sociability (Hyde 1983; Meillassoux 1981), while dowry is a form of commodity transfer (i.e., inheritance) with no such implications (Goody and Tambiah 1973). The fact that dowry has grown in value and diversity relative to bridewealth indicates a change towards a more open-ended acquisitiveness on the occidental model.

Traditionally, young peasant men who stood in the dependent *gandu* relationship to their fathers (Arnould 1984a; Goddard 1973; Hill 1972), had no well-defined role in consumption or other realms of sociopolitical life (Meillassoux 1981) as they had little or no control over household income. As in many other nonwestern settings (Gregory 1982), their migration for wage labor

in the twentieth century has served as a conduit for the introduction of novel consumer goods into village communities. They now express a revised age relation through their preference for wearing "small clothes" (Hausa, *k' ank' anan kaya*), which are secondhand, locally reconditioned western shirts and pants, and so-called "functionary suits" in opposition to the traditionally styled long, loose shirt, baggy drawstring pants, and embroidered gown and hat (Hausa, *manyan kaya*) preferred by rich and elderly men. The new dichotomy in rural clothing styles expresses the longstanding tension between fathers and sons (Hausa, *biye;* cf. Meillassoux 1981). Wage labor for the sons provokes tension within the household over the disposition of labor, remittances, and other resources (Arnould 1984a, 1984b; Meillassoux 1981; Olivier de Sardan 1984). While the material terms of the opposition in social status between men and their sons has changed, clothing style helps mediate the tension.

Young men prefer their style, which allows them to express their social differentiation through Western goods. It avoids direct comparison with the elders' style and downplays any competition for resources between them. "Small clothes" and functionary suits symbolically associate young men with the outside world and disassociate them from the constraints of village life. The style also symbolizes their availability for flirtation with unmarried women. To elder men, the wearing of *k' ank' anan kaya* connotes an absence of pretense to a voice in public affairs and household decisions. Wearing *manyan kaya*, often first worn when making formal visits to prospective in-laws or at marriage, provides a symbol of a younger man's intention to become a "serious" member of the community and to shed youthful ways. Thus, favorite objects are also used in Niger to denote age-related differences and statuses.

Relation to Favorite Objects in Photos

Overall, U.S. respondents indicated some physical closeness to their favorite objects in the photographs by leaning toward the object or touching it, but only about one-third of the respondents chose to hold or embrace the object.

Unlike our original expectations, there was almost no statistical relation between physical proximity to the object in the photographs and self-reported attachment to the object (Pearson correlation coefficient = 0.03, p = 0.68, see Table 1). Other interpretations of the meaning of physical proximity were therefore developed. Since there were no differences in physical closeness between either age or gender groups, an explanation based on object meaning rather than self-concept was explored.

Those respondents whose attachment to the object is based on person- or maker-based reasons tend to be physically closer to the object when photographed than are those whose attachment to the object is based on intrinsic object-related meanings ($t = 2.38, p = 0.02$). That is, respondents whose attachment to the favorite object is based upon personal memories of other people, past experiences, or the maker of the object tend to touch or embrace their favorite objects in photographs. However, respondents whose attachment to the favorite object is based upon characteristics of the object itself are likely to be more physically distant from the object when photographed. Rather than being an expression of degree of object attachment or liking as was originally postulated, physical closeness to favorite objects in photographs exemplifies an American expression of personal attachment to others vicariously through objects.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Attachment to objects is a pervasive phenomenon. Respondents in both cultures identified "favorite" objects. Favorite objects express aspects of self-concept such as gender, age, and distinctive cultural background.

People describe their favorite objects as reflecting personal meanings and attachments in both the U.S. and Niger. However, cross-cultural comparison shows that while the kinds and range of favorite objects varies, favorite objects serve as cultural icons that reflect local culture as experienced by the individual. The wider meanings of objects may not be consciously available to the informants, yet they become clear when cross-cultural comparisons are made of average levels of attachment and types of objects selected.

While the emic perception of Southwest Americans is that favorite objects represent unique, individual history, in fact, conventional meanings such as male mastery over the environment and female connections to family are encoded. Meanings of favorite objects are conventional in Niger, but informants do not stress the individuality of such meanings. Instead, conformity with shared meaning is often emphasized.

Nonetheless favorite objects do provide individualized cues for self-expression. Among Southwest Americans, affective memories of personal experiences or the person who made the item for the owner are often symbolized. This form of favorite object attachment is associated with stronger liking for the object than is object characteristic-based attachment. Attachments to objects serving as memory cues co-exist with higher levels of social linkage. Thus, favorite objects most often serve as symbols of, rather than replacements for, close interpersonal ties.

These objects provide individual solutions to the homogenization of value and emphasis on socially integrative meanings inherent in mass-produced objects, as well as the need for individual expression. Individuals singularize things through the mutual transfer of meaning and emotion between the objects and the individuals (McCracken 1986). Singularization deactivates objects as commodities and turns them into priceless and

seemingly unique icons for individual self-expression (Kopytoff 1986).

For the Nigerien sample, fewer types of objects were selected as favorites, reflecting not only the smaller number of consumer objects owned, but also individual commitment to a restricted set of cultural values. Fewer kinds of objects were favored by Zinderois than by Southwest Americans and virtually all were handmade. This is a predictable result in a recently monetized, virtually advertising-free culture. The meanings attached to objects from which and to which people transfer meanings (McCracken 1986) serve to link individuals to reference groups either cooperatively as with men's Koranic texts and women's silver bracelets, or competitively, as with men's horses and women's woven tapestries. Nonetheless, within conventional structures of meaning there is room for innovation and personal differentiation. Purchase decisions for such things as quartz watches or Western clothes are made with reference to culturally available ideas about consumption, gender, and age roles, as well as notions derived from exotic models.

It appears that favorite object attachment is conceptually and empirically distinct from the more general possessiveness component of materialism. The possessiveness component of materialism has very different salience and substantive meaning cross-culturally. This derives from the different world views (weltanschauung) of the two cultures (Judeo-Christian vs. Islamic-animist) and the way in which objects are used, as well as the way object ownership is used in the self-definition and self-expression processes. If, in the Southwest U.S., status is measured by what one has, in rural peasant Niger, wealth in people (arzikin mutane), expressed through the circulation of conventional objects (especially bridewealth) with shared meanings continues to have cultural significance. From this research, it does not appear that materialism expressed through generalized possessiveness is a cultural universal.

Based on this research, we question whether it is, in fact, possible to abstract the meaning of materialism from particular cultural contexts. Clearly, the Belk (1984, 1985) materialism scales are well designed to measure Western informants' ethnocentric conception of materialism. Belk's seminal conceptual and scale development work is an anchor for later research, but the scales themselves are not a universal empirical solution to measuring materialism cross-culturally. Fortunately, our interpretation of the Nigerien data was not solely dependent upon scaled surveys for developing an understanding of relations to objects. At this point, we recommend that the original Belk scales be treated as appropriate only to the culture in which they were developed. For cultures other than the United States, scale development should be based on thorough ethnographic studies of the meaning and expression of materialism in that culture. We recognize that our suggestion may preclude the development of a scale to measure mate-

rialism that is generalizable across cultures because the concept may vary so widely in its cross-cultural meaning.

From this research, it appears that favorite object attachment is also conceptually and empirically distinct from social linkage. Rather than serving as substitutes for a social network, favorite objects serve to solidify and represent both one's connections to and differences from others. Thus, favorite object attachment does not appear to be an expression of loneliness, but rather an expression of connections to others. Our research suggests this relationship is valid cross-culturally. The ethnology of exotic, gift-based economies shows social linkage, object attachment, and possessiveness develop particular logical relationships all of their own (e.g., Goodale 1985; Gregory 1982; Leach and Leach 1983; Malinowski 1922).

The data indicate that women emphasize social ties through favorite objects. Men represent their accomplishments and mastery in favorite objects. Given the patriarchal structure of both cultures studied, this result is not surprising, but it would be necessary to compare these results with data collected in matrilineal or matriarchal societies before generalizing to a constant gender effect rather than culture effect.

Age differences in favorite object attachment seem to represent changing meanings during different life phases and in cultural and economic history. In the Southwestern U.S., the break between the groups aged 55–64 and 65 and older showed a sharp disjuncture in contrast to the more continuous evolution through the earlier life phases. The oldest age groups showed a marked decline in length of ownership as well as liking of the favorite object. In Zinder, distinctive consumption behavior was found among young marriage-age people, who are most likely to be exposed to novel objects.

An effort to cross-validate degree of attachment to favorite objects using survey and photographic methods instead provided two different, but complementary, perspectives on object attachment. Photographs capture a different aspect of a person's relation to a favorite object than do survey self-reports. Physical closeness to the favorite object in the photograph more clearly expressed closeness to the individual for whom the object stood rather than degree of attachment to the favorite object.

Our perspective has been primarily social structural (e.g., culture, age, and gender) and economic in specifying object meanings. We go beyond Douglas and Isherwood (1979), who see objects primarily as points that mark patterns of social relationship. Our research supports the idea that object preference is built up after purchase through a dialectical process in which meaning and affect are transferred between individuals and objects over time, as suggested by Baudrillard (1968), Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), Levy (1981), and McCracken (1986). Building on this work,

we have tried to decipher some of what is transferred in this process. In addition, we have tried to capture some of the dynamism and conditionality inherent in these processes that allow for both stability in meanings and changes in types of preferred object through time.

To more fully understand the meaning of possessions and the dynamics of such systems, further research is needed to systematically explore the transmission of objects between individuals within families or households. The research finding that many favorite objects were gifts points to the importance of gifts to recipients. Gift-giving, particularly the giving away of one's own possessions, needs to be systematically explored longitudinally by studying gift-givers and the system of meanings they attempt to convey with the gift. In this context, studies of matched pairs of heirloom gift-givers and receivers would be particularly enlightening, as would studies of systems in rapid transition such as that in Zinder.

In addition, our cross-cultural perspective has shown that more research is needed to explore how preferences for favorite objects change both within the lifespan of individuals and through time as changes in consumption patterns occur, particularly in developing economies.

This research has not addressed the reasons why particular objects become cultural icons and not others. Why pianos and silver bracelets rather than guitars and calabash covers? Later research should build on the understanding that objects veil an underlying flow of social relationships (Douglas and Isherwood 1979) to determine why particular objects are chosen for this task. By focusing on particular favorite objects, this research has attempted to explore a portion of the consumption and ownership processes.

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