

George Clooney or Saddam Hussein? Why do consumers pay for celebrity possessions?

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A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* sheds some light into why someone would pay \$48,875 for a tape measure that had belonged to Jackie Kennedy or \$3,300 for Bernie Madoff's footstool.

"Why do people pay money for celebrity possessions?" write authors George E. Newman (Yale University), Gil Diesendruck (Bar-Ilan University), and Paul Bloom (Yale University). "Celebrity items often have little functional value. And because the objects themselves tend to be relatively common artifacts (clothing, furniture, etc.) they are often physically indistinguishable from a number of seemingly identical products in the marketplace."

The authors researched potential explanations for the phenomenon, delving into the concept of "contagion," the belief that a person's immaterial qualities or essence can be transferred onto an object through physical contact. "We were curious to examine the degree to which contagion beliefs may account for the valuation of celebrity items," the authors explain.

In their first study, the authors asked participants how much they would like to own [celebrity](#) and non-celebrity possessions. They asked about well-regarded individuals (like George Clooney) or despised individuals (like Saddam Hussein). They measured the dimensions of contagion, perceived market value, and liking of the individual. "For well-liked celebrities, the primary explanation seemed to be contagion—participants expressed a desire to own some of the

individual's actual physical remnants," the authors write. In contrast, when the items had belonged to a despised individual, people perceived that the items were potentially valuable to others, but contact with the hated individuals decreased the items' value.

In a second experiment, participants reported their willingness to purchase a sweater owned by someone famous (well-liked or despised). However, the sweater was "transformed" by sterilization or preventing its resale. For well-liked celebrities sterilizing reduced participants' willingness to purchase the sweater, while preventing the resale of the item had a comparably minimal effect. "In contrast, for despised individuals, the pattern was the opposite: removing contact only increased the sweater's value while preventing the sale to others significantly reduced participants' willingness to purchase it," the authors conclude.

More information: George E. Newman, Gil Diesendruck, and Paul Bloom. "Celebrity Contagion and the Value of Objects." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2011. Further information: ejcr.org . To be published online soon.

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