

Strange valentines: Some customers literally 'in love' with possessions

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Do you know anyone who seems obsessed with a car, gun or other prized possession? Just in time for Valentine's Day, new research from the W. P. Carey School of Business at ASU shows that a person may actually be "in love" with his or her favorite object.

The phenomenon is called "material possession love," and the researchers found these customers are typically lonely and easily can spend a whopping six times more money lavishing their love on beloved possessions than others spend on similar products.

"Until now, when we've thought about attachment to objects, most consumer researchers have thought of it in terms of self-identity, such as whether owning and driving an expensive sports car helps you tell others you have a higher social status or makes you seem sportier," said John Lastovicka, the study's primary author and marketing professor at ASU. "We tend to get attached to things that help us convey our sense of self. However, here we found that, in some cases, consumers became emotionally attached to possessions as real substitutes in what resembled human relationships."

The study by Lastovicka and his co-author, ASU business doctoral student Nancy Sirianni, recently was published online in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#).

The study is based on in-depth interviews with various people at places such as car shows and gun ranges, and also on sample surveys with

hundreds of gun owners, cyclists and computer owners. The researchers heard a variety of stories exemplifying loving relationships and were able to define which consumers displayed these relationships through a battery of questions assessing possession love.

For example, one car show participant named his car “Maybelline” and admitted to spending more time with the car than with people. Another participant described the purchase of his car in love-at-first-sight terms in which he spent “every penny I had, plus I borrowed ... from my dad to pay for it.”

Yet another car enthusiast knew the last four digits of his car’s Vehicle Identification Number (VIN) by heart and could offer a complete timeline of the car’s history, including knowing the date and place of manufacturing and every previous owner. However, the researchers’ findings weren’t just limited to cars.

“We went into this just looking at automobiles, but found it was a generalizable phenomenon,” Lastovicka said. “We were surprised to find people lavishing love on bicycles, computers and guns. Also, this wasn’t love for a brand – this was simply a love for the specific possession owned by the consumer.”

The researchers found love-smitten consumers were nurturing their beloved possessions by spending countless hours with them and a lot of money buying complementary products and services. Love-smitten gun owners spent an average of six times more money on their weapons than others. Computer and bicycle owners in this category spent about twice as much as others.

“I’ve been working with segmentation data for about 40 years, and I’ve never seen whopper segmentation effects like this,” Lastovicka said. “However, love is a powerful human emotion, so it shouldn’t be very

surprising that those who really love something are lavishing their money and time on it.”

Although smitten consumers are great customers, they require special care by businesses.

“A marketer needs to be careful not to judge these people as being weird,” Lastovicka said. “They are excellent customers who spend a lot to buy things to support their beloved, and they will likely pay premium prices – but they are savvy and will probably take their business elsewhere if they think a marketer or retailer is making fun of them.”

Lastovicka added it’s interesting to note these customers are actually not big on talking with just anyone about their prized products.

“It is likely that many enthusiasts are selective with their word of mouth, as they have learned family and friends no longer want to hear about the beloved possessions,” Lastovicka said.

Lastovicka also speculated that these possessions have to be items that can be physically touched by the owners. That is a key element because the prized possessions often are filling some type of interpersonal void.

“People with these attachments tend to be lonely, and maybe this is a sign of the times,” Lastovicka said. “As we have become a wealthier society, many of us move away from home. We have fewer close family members and friends around. People are looking for ways to emotionally connect without rejection, and this likely is better than alternative outcomes to loneliness, including alcohol abuse, delinquency and depression.”

More information: The new journal article is titled “Truly, Madly, Deeply: Consumers in the Throes of Material Possession Love.” To read

it, go to www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/658338 . More analysis is also available at Knowledge@W. P. Carey, the W. P. Carey School of Business' online resource, at [knowledge.wpcarey.asu.edu/cate ... 5372c4e423c423?cid=4](http://knowledge.wpcarey.asu.edu/cate...5372c4e423c423?cid=4)

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