

Researchers find people pay more at auctions if they believe a celebrity touched items

February 25 2014, by Bob Yirka

Psychologists George Newman and Paul Bloom, of Yale University have found that people buying items at an auction will pay more if they believe a celebrity has actually at some point touched them—passing on their essence in some inexplicable way. In their paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, the two describe two experiments they carried out on what they call "contagion"—where people believe that the essence of a person can be imbued into an object by touching it.

It's commonly known that people pay more for [celebrity](#) memorabilia than the items would be worth normally, and some likely have suspected that items that once belonged to someone famous, likely have more value if they have actually been touched by that person. A sweater believed to have been worn by a well-liked personality would likely have more value than a painting that hung in their foyer, for example. In this new effort, Newman and Bloom have found actual evidence that shows such assumptions to be true.

To learn more about the value of celebrity collectables the two gathered data regarding sales of items at auctions for John F. Kennedy (and his wife) and Marilyn Monroe memorabilia —two celebrities that are both deceased and widely admired. They also collected the same types of data regarding disgraced swindler Bernie Madoff and his wife. Analysis showed that people did indeed pay more for items that were perceived as having been touched by the celebrity—but only if they were well liked—Madoff castoffs went for market value or less.

In a second study, the researchers enlisted the assistance of 435 volunteers, asking each how much they would bid for a sweater that had once been owned by a celebrity they admired—up for sale at a hypothetical [auction](#). But there was a catch, some were told the sweater had been sterilized, others that it had been handled by other people before being put up for sale. Another group was told that the sweater once purchased, could never be sold.

The researchers found that people were not willing to pay more for the sweater that had been sterilized though they were willing to pay more for it despite it being touched by others, or even if they would never be allowed to profit from selling it, though not quite as much. Conversely, when the volunteers were asked to value sweaters worn by a despised celebrity, they found nearly the opposite results.

This work suggests that people believe that a person's essence can be carried by the things they touch (or removed via cleaning) though there is clearly no scientific evidence that such is the case.

More information: *PNAS* [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1313637111](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1313637111)

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