LOVE, DESIRE, AND IDENTITY

A Conditional Integration Theory of the Love of Things

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The role of love in brand relationships has drawn increasing interest (Ahuvia 1992, 1993, 2005; Albert, Merunka, and Valette-Florence 2008; Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Ji 2002; Kamat and Parulekar 2007; Keh, Pang, and Peng 2007; Shimp and Madden 1988; Whang et al. 2004; Yeung and Wyer 2005). While the primary focus of this chapter is on love in consumption, we also present a general theory of love that applies across a broad range of contexts, including interpersonal and person-object situations. By presenting a theory that is broad enough to cover many of the basic dynamics of love in person-object relationships, romantic interpersonal relationships, and family relationships, we do not mean to imply that all these types of love are identical. Past research has shown that even within romantic relationships there are many types of love (Lee 1988), so it would be foolish to deny the differences between a woman's love for her hobby and her love for her husband. But we focus here on developing a theory of love in consumption contexts that is also consistent with the research on love in interpersonal contexts. We leave a detailed exploration of the differences between these types of love to a separate project.

Some readers may question whether the concept of love is really applicable in person-object contexts. Skeptics might argue that when a consumer says "I love _____," whether it is football, wine, or whatever, they are simply using the term loosely, in the same way they might say "pass the chips, I'm starving" when in fact they aren't starving at all. This resistance to the idea that people can love things other than people comes in part from the view that love is sacred, and that by applying the term to things as prosaic as shoes, we cheapen and profane love's character (Ahuvia and Adelman 1993). Hence, examples of noninterpersonal love that have an elevated ethical or spiritual quality, such as love of God or love of country, rarely invoke the same skepticism as love of Gucci. Furthermore, we seldom hear the same skepticism expressed about the applicability of nonsacred psychological constructs such as hate to noninterpersonal settings.

While we sympathize with the idea that there is something special about love, considerable data suggests that love is nonetheless a psychological process that can be applied to people, ideas, activities, and objects. In exploring related topics, numerous consumer researchers have noted the presence of love in consumption (see Ahuvia 1993 for review). Working in psychology, Fehr and Russell (1991) asked respondents to list examples of love and found many examples, such as love of work, books, money, art, sports, honesty,

animals, nature, pets, country, and others. In looking at romantic love, Marston, Hecht, and Roberts (1986) found that "many lovers employed no relational constructs in their definition of love, but rather used only physiological responses or behavioral actions. . . . (thus indicating) that love need not be conceived in strictly relational terms, even when love is reciprocated." Finally, although people might use terms such as "starving" or "love" loosely in many contexts, if you asked a person who said "pass the chips I'm starving" if he was literally starving, presumably he would be able to tell you that he was not. This chapter draws in part on data from a larger study that included directly relevant questions about what consumers mean when they say they love something. As will be shown, respondents were able to distinguish between situations where they truly loved something and where they were speaking hyperbolically. More than 70 percent of respondents reported truly loving at least one thing other than a person. This work draws on and integrates past research, but also includes original data from interviews with consumers. The original data were collected as part of a larger study, and other parts of these data have been published elsewhere (Ahuvia 2005). This interview data is used to generate and illustrate a theory of love at a very general level that holds across a wide variety of loved objects. Henceforth, we refer to this broad array of things people love including products, ideas, brands, nature, pets, activities, and so on as love objects (LOs). In this way our use of the term LO is different from the psychoanalytic concept of a love object, which generally refers to a person.

The theory presented here was generated using a constant comparative methodology in which the theoretical framework was compared to original findings and to findings from past research on interpersonal love and on consumer behavior. Because the research here emphasizes theory generation over theory testing, the hypotheses will not be presented prior to the discussion of the results.
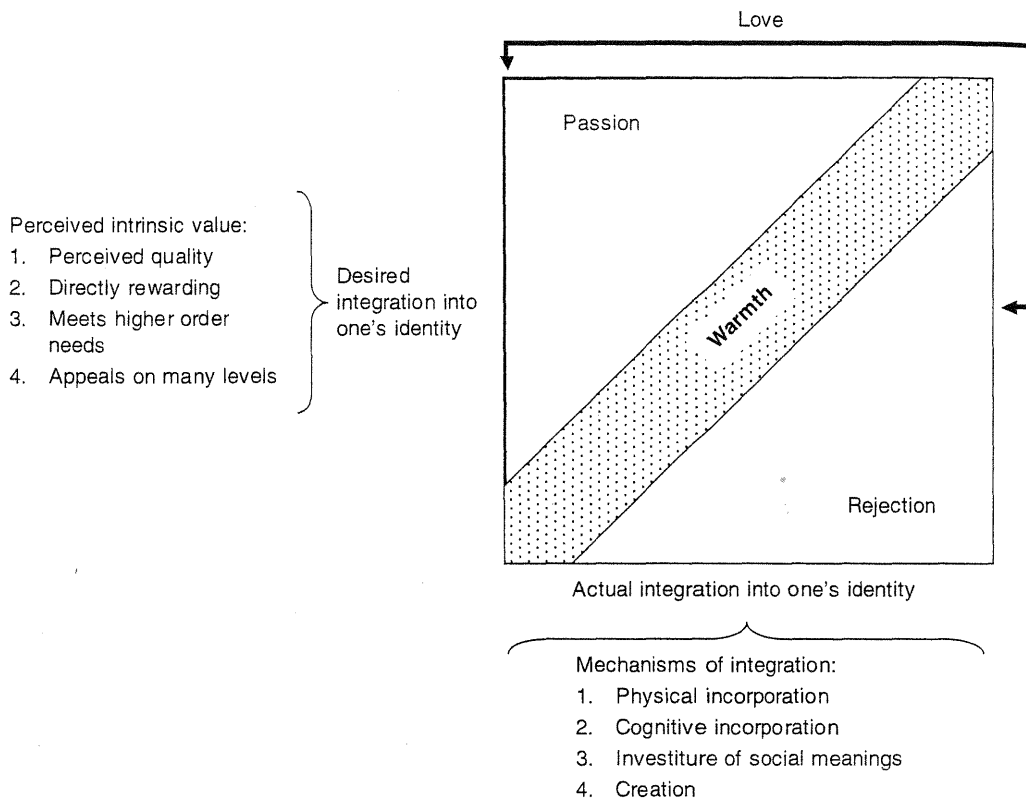
After a discussion of research methodology, results are presented in which the incorporation of the LO into the lover's sense of identity is identified as the core of a larger psychological system of love. We then go on to explore the reasons why consumers want to incorporate objects or other people into their identity, and the processes by which this incorporation takes place.

DATA COLLECTION

Respondents were contacted through a snowball sampling procedure, which began with the first author asking personal contacts who fit the informant profile for a list of their acquaintances who might be willing to participate. The respondents were evenly split by gender (36 male and 33 female), predominantly white (white 56, black 10, Hispanic 2, other 1), ranging from 23 to 45 years of age ($M = 32$), and were well educated (post-college = 38, college = 27, high school or less = 5).

For all respondents, confidentially taped interviews were conducted over the phone and lasted between ten minutes and one hour, averaging twenty to thirty minutes. Respondents were asked, "If there is something you love, aside from people with whom you have a close personal relationship, what is it?" For each thing that they loved, respondents were

Figure 18.1 **Visual Representation of the Theory of the Love, Desire, and Identity Theory**

Mechanisms of integration:
1. Physical incorporation
2. Cognitive incorporation
3. Investiture of social meanings
4. Creation

asked a uniform set of questions addressing the depth of their feelings for the LO (love object), whether what they felt was love in the strictest sense of the word or if they were "just using the word loosely," and why they felt as they did. The interview continued until the respondent ran out of things that he or she loved.

Ten respondents (6 female, 4 male) were then selected for follow-up in-depth interviews in their homes lasting two to four hours. These respondents were selected based on the contents of their phone interviews, to allow for a more detailed investigation of key issues uncovered in the first set of interviews. These in-home interviews included a discussion of interpersonal love as well as a continued focus on LOs.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Love was widespread among these respondents. Only two respondents claimed to not love anything aside from other people. Nor was the word *love* applied to objects only in a metaphorical sense. Even when respondents spoke in the strictest and most literal sense of the word, 72 percent still said that they loved something other than a person with

whom they had a close personal relationship. Therefore, as the respondents define the domain of love, people love a wide variety of things beyond family, friends, and lovers (see Ahuvia 1992 for tables itemizing what people loved).

Results are presented as a system of emergent themes connected to form an integrated theory. Figure 18.1 presents a visual preview of this theory, which will serve as a road map for the subsequent discussion.

Integration of the Loved Object into the Self

In this chapter we use the terms *self* and *identity* interchangeably to refer to a person's conscious and nonconscious idea of whom and what they are. Although one's physical body and one's consciousness are seen by most people as important parts of their self-identity, the self generally extends far beyond these two elements. The notion that love involves an integration of the self and the LO, so that the LO becomes an important part of the lover's identity, has a long tradition in Western culture. In the interpersonal context, this notion dates back at least as far as Plato's Symposium, which refers to the myth that past humans had four arms, four legs, and two heads, but were split in two and now must search for their missing half. This tradition continues in studies that report that love is often experienced as a merging (Dion and Dion 1988; Murstein 1988; Tennov 1979), experimental studies that show that as a relationship becomes closer the other is increasingly merged with the self (Aron et al. 1991), and theories of love that in whole or in part see love as a merging of the lover and the beloved (Aron and Aron 1986; Aron et al. 1989; DeRivera 1984; Gonzales-Crussi 1988; Grant 1976; Hatfield 1982; Jeffries 1993; Kovecses 1991; Maslow 1970; Person 1988; Sperling 1985).

In consumer behavior literature, work on how products become part of consumers' identity has become a major theme of current research (Arnould and Thompson 2005, see also Chapter 4), and Ahuvia (2005) has shown that this process is particularly important to consumers' love of things. Thus, integration of an LO into the lover's identity may serve as a common psychological core, which can unite some streams of research on love in consumer behavior and interpersonal contexts.

Within the interviews, respondents commonly expressed the view that LOs were part of their selves and this view was systematically connected to the likelihood that these relationships would be considered real love. As one respondent said, LOs are "your identity, what you think of yourself, there's no separation. When you're talking about what you love . . . you are essentially talking about yourself" (female, graduate student, age 37). In total, fifteen respondents specifically talked about LOs as being part of them and 80 percent[1] of these respondents saw their relationships with these LOs as real love. In contrast, six respondents commented that the LO in question was not really part of themselves and none of these LOs were viewed as true love.

Four main themes characterized respondents' understandings of what it means for something to be part of the self. Things that are parts of the self (1) affect or change who you are, (2) express the self, (3) form physical extensions of the body, or (4) have a shared history with oneself. The idea that LOs are part of the self when they change an

individual was the most central of these themes. This self-change can be focused on the public self by changing one's appearance, as in the woman who loved clothes shopping because "It's a way to become someone else, and start afresh" (female, public relations writer, 30). Conversely, one's private perspective can be changed.

> [Books] participate in making me up, or how would you say—they're part of me.
>   (Q: What do you mean when you say they're part of you?)
>   You incorporate them in such a way that it just adds on and on and on about how you would look at life, it's sort of expansive for myself. (female, unemployed, 37)

Second, self-expression is closely tied to self-extension in that we often "put a lot of ourselves" into that which we create. As a respondent said in describing his hand-painted model soldiers, "This is me, I did this" (male, freelance writer, 36). Creation is particularly important when the created object or event is primarily a form of self-expression rather than a response to pragmatic requirements or the demands of others.[2] As one respondent put it, dancing is "such a part of myself; it's a self-expression that's completely uninhibited and pure for myself" (female, actor, 26).

Third, some respondents also viewed LOs as a physical extension of the brain or body. This was particularly true for photo collections and journals that served as extensions of the respondents' memory and hence their life experiences. For example, one respondent reported loving photographs because "I like to be able to keep a record of that because my memory isn't that sharp" (female, salesperson, 30).

Finally, respondents tacitly recognized the concept of contamination (Belk 1988; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989) when they expressed the idea that an LO becomes a part of the self by sharing an extensive history together. (As used here, the word *contamination* is a technical term that lacks the usual negative connotations and just means having something "rub off on you.") For example, one respondent explained that he loved his jeans because "they are so old and comfortable and part of me" (male, publishing, 24).

The four themes just mentioned—that objects become part of the self when they (1) affect or change who you are, (2) express the self, (3) form physical extensions of the body, or (4) have a shared history with you—reveal how respondents themselves understood the integration of LOs into their identity. But because a person's sense of self exists at both conscious and nonconscious levels, a person does not need to be overtly aware that an object is part of their identity for that to be the case. Self-relevant responses are one way to ascertain if an object is seen by someone as part of their identity, even if they are not consciously aware of that relationship. Self-relevant responses (shame, guilt, pride) occur in response to actions taken by the self but not when similar actions are taken by others (Roseman 1984) or in the case of responses like offense, when actions are directed at the self but not when similar actions are directed at others (Ortony, Clore, and Collins 1988). For example, if a stranger is insulted we may feel anger at the rude speaker, but we would only feel offense if we ourselves were the target of the barb. Hence, when respondents talked about being proud when their LOs were the focus of

compliments, or insulted when their LOs were slighted, they were implicitly including these LOs in their selves. This was made explicit by a respondent's discussion of feeling "hurt" and "offended" when she felt her inherited antique furniture had been evaluated simply for its aesthetic properties.

> These are things that I love. If other people don't realize that they're not just pieces of furniture, then that's what hurts my feelings. . . . It felt like I wasn't being understood, because they're such an integral part of me (female, marketing manager, 35).

Evidence for seeing love as involving the integration of the LO into the lover's sense of identity also comes from projective techniques. When responding to projective questions that asked them to imagine what their LO would be like if it were a person, respondents tended to personify their LOs as a mirror image of themselves or their ideal selves. As a respondent said about his personification of political correctness, "it's male—cause that's me" (male, fund-raiser, 29). This mirroring of the self sometimes even occurred in situations where it seemed implausible. In an in-depth interview, one respondent projected both her plants and music as women who were thousands of years old. Yet she later said that she felt similar to them in this respect because "I feel as though I am a very old soul and so are they" (female, graduate student, 37). This was also common in the anthropomorphized projections of loved pets, supporting a similar finding by Hirschman (1994, pp. 620–621).

Since we construct our self in part through our choice of LOs, it follows that we would choose LOs that allow us to become the person we want to be. Hence respondents sometimes projected their LOs as their ideal self rather than their actual self. A freelance writer, who was living on a limited budget, personified his Macintosh computer as a Victorian gentleman "and also, a person who matches my tastes in all things. . . ." But "he would probably be a little more in the creature comforts . . . better meals." He then goes on to reflect, "I think I would have made a good Victorian gentleman. Yeah, someone who is hardworking and dedicated to what he does, but wants money to be beneath him. Yeah, really wish I was like that" (male, freelance writer, 36). This pattern of projecting one's self or one's ideal self into the personification of the object was entirely absent from respondents' projections of objects they felt neutral about.

Finally, evidence for the important role that integration of the LO into the self plays in love comes from the tests respondents used to determine if they truly loved something. "If possessions are viewed as part of self, it follows that an unintentional loss of possessions should be regarded as a loss or lessening of self" (Belk 1988). Since "loss of self" is traumatic, a good test of the degree to which an LO is part of the self is the extent to which it would be missed if it were lost. Similarly, one could also look at the degree to which someone would be willing to sacrifice to keep the LO from being lost. In light of this reasoning, it is interesting that the two most common tests that respondents used to judge if they really loved an item were "how much would I miss it" and "would I be willing to sacrifice for it." Respondents in the phone interviews mentioned nineteen times that they would greatly miss an LO if it were lost. Of those LOs, fourteen

(74 percent) were considered real love. In contrast, respondents mentioned nineteen times with reference to different LOs that they would not be greatly missed if lost. In this case only two (11 percent) were felt to be love in the literal sense of the word. A similar pattern was found when respondents talked about being willing to sacrifice for an LO. Respondents claimed five times that they would be willing to sacrifice for an LO, and in three of those cases (60 percent) that item was considered real love. But, in the four cases where respondents mentioned that they would not be willing to sacrifice for an LO, none of the relationships were seen as love in the strictest sense of the word. While an object's being part of the self is not the only reason one might sacrifice for it or miss it if it were lost, these feeling and behaviors are indicators of self-extension. In the context of the other evidence presented, it is plausible to conclude that when respondents were deciding if they loved something, their asking themselves if they would sacrifice for it or miss it if it were lost amounted to an introspective test of whether the LO was a part of themselves.

Conditional Integration: The Desired versus the Actual Level of Integration with the Loved Object

So far, we have seen through extant psychological literature that the merging of selves is a well-established construct in research on romantic love, and that possessions can also be incorporated into the self. The current research has integrated these findings by showing that the merging of self and other in love is not limited to the interpersonal domain, but is central to consumers' love of objects as well. This conclusion has been supported by evidence showing the importance of self-extension in respondents' understanding of love, as well as findings from projective techniques, self-relevant emotions, and anticipated feelings of loss.

Given this evidence, it might be tempting to simply equate love with the inclusion of the LO in the self. However, if love were synonymous with the LO being part of the self, how could we explain the respondents who had aspects of themselves that they did not love? For example, if self equals love, why did one of the in-depth interview respondents find it a constant struggle to maintain much love for herself at all?

Answering these questions requires a distinction between the desired level of integration (the vertical axis on Figure 18.1) and the actual level of integration (the horizontal axis on Figure 18.1). Love occurs when the desired level of integration is high and sets in motion a psychological process (described in the following section) by which the desired and the actual level of integration reach a psychological balance. This is why we label the theory of love presented here *conditional integration*. Integration of an object into a person's identity only constitutes love when that integration is highly desired. When people do not love themselves it simply means that there are aspects of themselves that they wish were not part of themselves (i.e., the actual level of integration is higher than the desired level). The relationship between the desired and the actual level of integration helps explain three other constructs related to love: passion, warmth, and rejection.

Passion, Warmth, and Rejection

Passion is sometimes experienced as "the urge to merge" (female, pastoral counselor, 30). Passion is the desire to invest mental and emotional energy in increasing or maintaining the extent to which an object is integrated into the self. The more the desired level of integration exceeds the actual level of integration the greater the passion will be. In some cases, when the integration of the LO into the consumers' identity is very high, it can take a great deal of mental and emotional investment just to maintain that high level of cathexis.

Warmth is an equilibrium condition that occurs when the actual level of integration approximately matches the desired level. Within the diagonal warmth region, the higher the level of integration, the more warmth is experienced (see Figure 18.1). Maintaining a high level of warmth requires mental, emotional, and physical energy. Just as friendships fade if neglected, respondents mentioned several hobbies and other formerly loved objects that had become less central to their selves through lack of involvement. It is possible that warmth is closely related to attachment, although a closer examination of the relationship between these two constructs is a topic for future research.

Rejection occurs in the situation when one desires a lower level of integration than is currently the case. When the actual level of integration is much higher than the desired level, rejection can become highly emotional and is termed "hate." Through rejection, objects are removed from the self. In Schouten's (1991) study of plastic surgery, he reported on a woman whose rejection of her nose was so strong that she did not consider it a part of her self. Because the interviews in our study focused on things the respondents loved, there was little discussion of rejection. However, this idea of rejection is logically consistent with what it would mean for an object to be an unwanted part of the self. Further research is needed to better understand this phenomenon and the process of person-object relationship dissolution in general.

Mechanism of Integration

The interviews conducted for this study revealed four basic mechanisms of integration: physical incorporation, cognitive incorporation, investiture of social meanings, and creation.

Physical incorporation occurs when the LO is seen as a literal or metaphoric element of the person's physical body (Belk 1988). Many respondents reported loving foods, which literally do become part of the body. But more often, physical incorporation operated through control. The distinction between self and other may arise in infancy through the realization that some objects defy direct control by the will, that is, the baby's hand moves by mental command but the rattle does not. Following this line of reasoning McClelland (1951) argues that when we can control an external object in the same way that we can control our own body, we come to see that object as part of the self. This can occur with physical objects, but it was most common among these respondents in gaining mastery over an activity such as athletics or the arts. In love, the direction of control is usually

person over object, but this is not always the case. Food in particular was cited as an LO that respondents both controlled (e.g., cooking as creative expression) and were controlled by. Physical incorporation can also occur through "contamination" (Belk 1988), a more passive form of incorporation through close physical contact. Although contamination is an important mechanism by which objects such as clothing became part of the self, it played a fairly minor role in the examples of love uncovered in this study.

Cognitive incorporation involves learning about the LO (Sartre 1943), fantasizing about the LO (Campbell 1987; Stendhal 1947), or in some other way thinking about the LO (Aron et al. 1989) so as to strengthen its importance within one's self image. The desire to get to know the LO in a deep and intimate way is evident in the respondents' tendency to be experts in the area of their love. Along these lines, the following hyperbolic account of what it would mean to truly love books illustrates the importance of obsessive thought.

> If [my love of books] was real love I'd probably waste away. I'd probably never eat. I probably would never get up. I'd probably have a bed full of books and I don't think that's wholesome. You've got to eat, drink to survive. You can't just stay stuck with a book (male, office associate, 44).

Objects can also be integrated into a person's identity through the *investiture of social meanings*. On a social level, Lancaster and Foddy (1988) argue that the self is defined largely in terms of social roles that often contain role others (husband-wife, teacher-student, etc.), and that these role others can sometimes become part of the self (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Objects can also serve as role others, but in this case, the phrase "props for one's identity" might be more appropriate. For example, when a king is crowned, the crown invests authority in the king, and as such makes him who he is. We therefore call this *investiture,* in that objects invest their users with a social identity that then defines the self. Investiture is one of the most important mechanisms for self-extension in love. Virtually every LO contributed to the respondents' identities, if only inasmuch as loving music makes one a "music lover."

Purchase of a product facilitates all three mechanisms of incorporation discussed so far. Purchase allows greater access to the LO and hence can facilitate physical incorporation. Purchase also increases our thoughts about an object and our knowledge of that object, although for many consumers highly involved thinking about an object often precedes the purchase (Campbell 1987), and so it is possible for an object to become integrated into the self before the purchase takes place. And on a social level, the mere act of purchasing can increase the level of integration. To understand why, the following analysis looks more closely at what it means for something to be experienced as part of the self.

James (1890) divided the self into two main parts: the "I" and the "me." The I is the experiencing agent and the wellspring of volition and action. When you close your eyes and imagine an object, the I is that part of you which is "seeing" the object. It gets its name from the English grammar system in which we say "I did X" or "I prefer Y." The me consists of all the possessions of the I. It also gets its name because we say "my be-

liefs are part of me," "my memories are part of me," or "my books are part of me." That all of these things are *possessions* of the I is supported by the finding that when asked to name their most important possessions, people frequently list memories, abilities, and other intangible aspects of their selves (Hirschman and LaBarbera 1990). Furthermore, Prentice (1987) provided experimental evidence that possessions, attitudes, and values are all fundamentally similar at a psychological level. Because the me is connected to the I through the relationship of possession, the degree to which something is considered part of the self is a function of its level of subjectively felt ownership, the "mineness" of the thing (Rudmin 1991, 1993), as reflected in the romantic proposition, "Will you be mine?" This subjective sense of ownership is not the same as legal ownership. Many people feel a sense of ownership for a professional sports team but few people legally own one. Nonetheless, people generally feel a stronger sense of ownership for objects they have purchased. Therefore, simply by purchasing an object its "mineness" and hence its level of integration into the self can increase. Furthermore, owning an object increases the degree to which it invests us with a social identity.

Creation is the fourth mechanism of incorporation. Up to this point we have been following an implicit model in which love begins with encountering a desirable object outside of the self. This leads to passion, which in turn activates some combination of physical incorporation, cognitive incorporation, and investiture. These mechanisms continue to operate until the LO has been integrated into the self to the desired degree, and a state of warmth is achieved. This sequence of events explains why passion for an LO, whether a new car or a new lover, is generally highest at the beginning of the relationship. It is also of managerial importance to marketers, because it models the way the commercial products typically become loved and integrated into the self. But this is not the only possible way LOs become part of the self. Physical objects that are created by the respondents, and values or activities that are self-expressive for the respondents, are seen as emerging from the self and come into the world already a part of the self. In this way, self-enlargement follows a birth metaphor rather than a consumption "taking in" metaphor.

The ability of LOs to provide a means of self-expression was one of the stronger themes to emerge from the analysis, being mentioned by over half the respondents. Not surprisingly, activities such as cooking and making music figured prominently in these discussions. For example, one respondent talked about the experience of writing for her own pleasure.

> It's something that I feel constantly surprised and kind of tickled and delighted when I find the words and the expressions and the ideas I never knew I had and I certainly can't express verbally. I actually see it coming out on the page. I guess the reason I love it is not only a purging thing, a cathartic thing, it tickles a place inside me I don't think I knew I had before (female, social worker, 29).

In an extensive review of the literature on the self, Greenwald and Pratkanis (1984) concluded that "the self engenders strong feelings—ones often characterized by passionate warmth" (p. 151) and that "perhaps the most prominent feature of the self is the positive

affect that is normally attached to one's own . . . attributes" (p. 166). It is not just that we like objects and therefore integrate them into our selves; the reverse is also true. We feel warmly about objects precisely because they are part of the self.

The Desired Level of Integration Equals Perceived Intrinsic Value

Several themes emerged from the data that can help explain why respondents desired to integrate an object into the self. Many of these are discussed in more detail elsewhere (Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2008). These themes focus on (1) the perceived quality of the LO, (2) the directness with which the LO meets the lover's needs, (3) the relation of the LO to higher order versus lower order needs, and (4) the ability of the LO to appeal on many levels. Together, these themes support the interpretation that the desired level of integration is determined by the perceived intrinsic value of the object.

One of the most common themes to emerge from the data was the importance of *perceived quality,* that is, that the LO was, in one way or another, nothing short of magnificent. Since LOs provide us with valued experiences, the most desirable LOs would be the ones that were most capable of providing these experiences (i.e., the most excellent ones). It also seems that excellence in an LO is valued even beyond the instrumental benefits it brings us. Since LOs become part of the self, if we wish to be excellent people it makes sense that we should construct ourselves out of excellent building blocks. Compounding the tendency to love excellent things, there is also a tendency for people to endow the things they own or have created with a high level of perceived value that goes beyond what might objectively be warranted based simply on the quality of the object (Tom et al. 2007).

The things people loved were always *directly rewarding* to the consumer in some way. When the rewards for performing an action are (1) psychological states such as pleasure, happiness, a sense of accomplishment, existential meaning, and so on, and (2) perceived by the actor as the direct result of the action, the action is seen as intrinsically rewarding and the object that provides that reward is intrinsically valuable; that is, people talking about engaging in some activity "for the love of it" as opposed to seeing it as a means to another end. If a person works at a job she doesn't like to earn money to go skiing which she does enjoy, she might say that her job is financially rewarding but not loved, whereas skiing is intrinsically rewarding and hence loved.

The deepest and fullest experience of love was more strongly associated with LOs helping to meet *higher order needs* such as social connection, existential meaning, spirituality, personal accomplishment, or the expression of ethical values. As Person (1988) wrote, "love is an antidote not just to personal neediness, but to those existential anxieties that encompass our sense of the frailty and brevity of our life on earth. . . . It is the knowledge of our insignificance in the universe and, ultimately, the awareness of our own death that causes us to seek transcendence in soulful merger with a beloved" (p. 85). LOs met these higher order needs in a wide variety of ways. Gifts were often loved for the way they represented connections to other people, other LOs reflected political or religious commitments, loved products were also sometimes symbolically connected

to significant personal achievements or the meaning of adulthood. When LOs only met lower order needs such as tasting good or being fun, respondents frequently talked about "enjoying" the LO but not truly loving it. Love represents an intimate and profound relationship dealing with deeply held values.

The previous discussion of LOs meeting higher order needs should not be read to imply that only sentimental, sacred, or existential values are related to love. If an LO can only provide one type of value, it is more likely to be loved if it relates to the lover in a deeply intimate way. But it is far better still if the LO can appeal on many levels by providing a wide variety of meanings and benefits. Generally speaking, for an LO to be considered real love it was not enough to be beautiful, or pleasurable, or spiritually meaningful, for example; rather, it had to be all three and hence "the perfect thing" (Mick and DeMoss 1990). The finding that true LOs appeal on many levels can also make sense of statements from the context of romantic love such as "you don't want me, you only want my body." This statement can present a minor puzzle because after all, one's body is surely "you." This puzzle is easily solved by realizing this statement really means "you only want one aspect of my self and not my entire self." Love in its fullest expression integrates our entire self with the totality of the other. As Simmel (1984; quoted in Bertilsson 1991) said, "as one who loves, I am a different person than I was before, for it is not one or the other of my 'aspects' or energies that loves but rather the entire person." Thus, LOs that appeal on many levels at once are more truly loved.

Caveat: Love Takes Place in the World

The discussion of love so far has focused on the respondents' internal psychological processes with regard to a specific LO. This may give the reader the false impression that love takes place between a person and an LO cut off from the rest of the world. For balance it is essential to understand at least the following point: LOs were simultaneously part of the respondents' selves and part of their intimate world. Along with seeing LOs as part of themselves, many respondents also spoke about LOs as being "part of their lives." This meant that an LO took up a lot of their time and energy. If it was an activity, they performed it frequently; if it was an object, they used it or thought about it regularly. Therefore, saying that an object is part of one's life implies that it is central to the world in which one lives. By loving, whether it is loving people, things, or activities, we are not only constructing the self but we are creating the world around us. By surrounding ourselves with loved objects and people we assure a level of harmony between the self and the environment through making self and parts of the environment one and the same.

CONCLUSION

The people and things we love are part of ourselves. We think about them the same way we think about ourselves, we act toward them as we act toward ourselves, we experience pride in their achievements and shame in their failures, our relationships with them help define our identity, and we take responsibility for their well-being. The conditional

integration theory of love developed here can be seen as modeling two processes (see Figure 18.1). In the first case the LO is encountered as separate from the individual. This is common in commercial transactions where the object begins as a product or service being offered for sale. In these instances the desire to integrate the object into the self is a function of its perceived intrinsic value. Objects high in perceived intrinsic value elicit passion, which in turn activates social and psychological mechanisms for integrating the object into the self. As the object becomes integrated into the self, the passion cools and becomes warmth. The second case occurs when the LO is produced through personal creative activity. In this case it is already significantly integrated into the self upon completion. Once the LO has been created, the individual may increase or decrease its level of integration using the same mechanisms he or she would for an object he or she had purchased. But because the object is already part of the self, the individual may endow it with value that is higher than if the evaluation were made by a neutral party.

Love spans the somewhat artificial disciplinary boundary between consumer behavior and social science more broadly construed. Regrettably, the scope of this chapter did not allow for a discussion of this theory's implications for the models of romantic love on which it is based. However, this theory was constructed to be consistent not only with the data on love collected for this study, but also with the published data on interpersonal love.

This theory suggests that love has implications for managers regarding both initial and repeat purchases. Given the connection between love and impulse purchasing, in initial purchase situations marketers may desire for consumers to "fall in love" with their product. This might be accomplished by increasing the hedonic and symbolic value of the product. In repeat purchase situations consumers are likely to be extremely loyal to objects they love. If love is like interpersonal love, this loyalty may even lead to a strong cognitive bias to devalue alternative products so as not to be tempted to break the committed love relationship (Johnson and Rusbult 1989).

Artistic products that could be said to "come from the heart" of their producers (Hirschman 1983) had an easier time finding their way into the hearts of their consumers. The same was true for activities that facilitated creative self-expression, learning, or in other ways allowed the respondent to grow as a person or reflected their creative energies. This suggests that love may be a particularly important construct for marketers of extraordinary experiences (Arnould and Price 1993), social marketers, religion marketers, politicians, or others interested in promoting more profound ideas or activities [Deighton's (1994) suggestions for amplifying meaning and intensifying involvement in performances may be relevant here]. Love might also be a particularly relevant goal for product and service designers whose aesthetic output has a more personal feeling to it. Finally, it may also be a viable strategy to tie one's product into a loved object rather than make the product itself the direct focus of love (e.g., a current Nike ad campaign tries to tie Nike shoes into the love of running rather than talk about the love of shoes directly).

The study of consumer behavior has many missions, not the least of which is understanding those consumption experiences that play a significant role in the lives of consumers. Research on loved objects provides a spotlight for illuminating some of the

most psychically significant consumption experiences. Love is an extreme experience, but not an aberrant one. By learning about love we learn more than isolated insights into consumer preferences. We learn an essential way in which people construct both the self and the intimate world.

NOTES

1. Percentages are used to contrast the frequency of responses within the sample. They are not intended to be generalized as survey data to a larger population.

2. This finding may be particularly limited to western individualistic culture. Markus and Kitayama (1991) found that defining true self-expression as the actualization of internal drives unencumbered by external social roles or other interpersonal considerations is largely a Western concept.

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