Chapter 2
Fetishism and Consumer Value

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ABSTRACT

Fetishism is the attribution of value to an object. To understand fetishism, therefore, requires a grasp of the value which is attributed to an object. More dynamically, it points to the need to comprehend the mechanisms—the processes—by which value is attributed to a product. The purpose of this chapter is to offer a new conceptualization of consumer value. The chapter begins by presenting a brief review of the consumer value literature, situated within the broader context of axiology. It then summarizes research which explored the concept of consumer values (plural) in the specific social context of the high-fidelity audio culture—those people for whom high-fidelity audio has been fetishized. The chapter continues by offering and explaining the new conceptualization of consumer value, and suggesting future research directions. Finally, it discusses the new conceptualization of consumer value with respect to consumer culture in general, and to fetishism in particular.

INTRODUCTION

In the everyday, fetishism might be conflated with eroticism, conjuring the entry for ‘sexual fetishism disorder’ in the American Psychiatric Association’s (2013) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders which defines sexual fetishism as a sexual excitement which is derived from an inanimate object or non-genital body part. According to Mulvey (1993), however, fetishism is a broader social phenomenon, involving “the attribution of self-sufficiency and autonomous powers to a manifestly ‘man’ derived object” (p. 7). Indeed, fetishism entails a kind of Cartesian relationship between an object of interest (the fetish) and the person who has an interest in the object (the fetishist).

The term fetish is thought to be derived from the Portuguese term feitiço, meaning spell, superstition, or even witchcraft (Pietz, 1987). It arose in the 17th century when Portuguese explorers noted the significance which the various native peoples of West Africa whom they encountered vested in the amulets, charms, and talismans which they wore. The notion of feitiço “stressed its use as an instrument to achieve a concrete, material effect, while its status as an object of worship was central to the idea of idolo [idolatry]” (Pietz, 1987, p. 36).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-6120-0.ch002
Karl Marx introduced the term *warenfetischismus* (commodity fetishism) in his book *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* (1867). Marx argued that in an economy of independent producers and buyers, commercial activity adjusts according to the changing values of the goods and services (the commodities) which are produced and exchanged. Social interaction, therefore, is expressed and mediated through two things: 1. money and 2. commodities. The intrinsic worth of any commodity, however, Marx theorised, is denoted by the value which buyers in the market attribute to it.

It is this idea of attributed value which was likewise captured by Hekma (2007) who defined fetishism as the attribution of value to an object. Two fundamental ideas are central to this definition. First, an object is not inherently valuable. Indeed, its worth is not a given *prima facie*. On the contrary, an object only becomes valuable when value is attributed to it…when it becomes imbued with value. When this object is a product—a commodity in the language of Marx—fetishism ought to be considered as an aspect of consumer culture.

Second, fetishism occurs within a specific social context. That is to say, an object is not universally a fetish, but instead a fetish only to a group of people for whom the object has been fetishised. As underlined by Mulvey (1993), “fetishes are supremely culturally specific, so…one man’s divine may be another man’s lump of wood” (p. 7). Again, therefore, when fetishes are products, fetishism ought to be considered as an aspect of consumer culture.

To understand fetishism in consumer culture (à la Hekma and Marx), therefore, requires a grasp of the value which is attributed to a product. More dynamically, it points to the need to comprehend the mechanisms—the processes—by which value is attributed to a product. To understand fetishism in consumer culture also requires an emic approach, which seeks to understand meanings from the ‘native’s perspective’ (Holt, 1994) in his or her own terms and conceptual categories. An emic approach also assumes that a co-constituting relationship exists between these meanings and one’s existential stance within a specific culture (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). In simple terms, an emic approach means making sense of a fetish within its cultural context.

Value—consumer value, more specifically—however, is not well-understood by most marketers. This is ironic, considering that consumer value is perhaps the foundational concept in the discipline of marketing. As suggested by Holbrook (1999),

> given the importance of this topic, one might expect that a vast marketing-related literature would be devoted to exploring the nature and types of consumer value…Yet my impression is that such emerging attempts have thus far failed to investigate the nature and types of consumer value with anything like the degree of comprehensiveness and systematization needed to make telling conceptual inroads into the issues of concern (p. 3).

The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to offer a new conceptualisation of consumer value. The conceptualisation stems from research which explored the concept of consumer values (plural) in the specific social context of the high-fidelity audio culture—those people for whom high-fidelity audio has been fetishised. The research initially sought to address the weaknesses of Rokeach’s conceptualisation of values which has come to dominate the discipline of marketing. In doing so, however, it ultimately led to a new conceptualisation of consumer value (singular). The chapter begins by presenting a brief review of the consumer values literature, situated within the broader context of axiology. It then summarises the research within the high-fidelity audio microculture. The chapter continues by offering and
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