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PLANNED PURCHASES AND PERSONAL AMULETS: REPRESENTATIONS OF TWO MATERIAL POSSESSIONS IN JAPAN, CANADA AND THE UK

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One apparently common behavior, which can be defined at a general (etic) level, which seems to be universally known (i.e. known, as far as we can determine, in every culture and throughout history; Lewis, 2000), and which is un-controversially magico-religious, is the use of amulets. It is a feature of many religions and is referred to both as superstition and as magic by different authors. The terms *amulet* and *talisman* are equivalent and, in English, the terms *charm* or *lucky charm* and *mascot* also refer to types of amulets. In Japanese there are also various terms for different kinds of amulets, including *omamori*, *yaku-yoke* or *ma-yoke* and, from the English, *masukotto*.

An amulet can be defined as *any material object, the deliberate retention (or placing) of which affords the user some purported benefit beyond that resulting from the technical instrumental capacity of the object* (Lewis, 2000, p. 20). Thus, an amulet is defined by its use, deliberate *retention*, and by some purported *benefit* that goes beyond the technical, instrumental properties of the object. For example, in one study a respondent referred to his lucky penknife which, because it was lucky, he always carried in his pocket. As he kept the penknife with him (*retention*) because it brought luck (*benefit*) it is considered to be an amulet.

Having defined amulet use at this abstract level, one can then enquire at a more concrete level as to its significance. A parallel may be drawn with emotion research: "the very same phenomena may be considered either cross-culturally similar or cross-culturally different, depending on the level of abstraction chosen for description" (Mesquita, Frijda, & Scherer, 1997, p. 266).

A way of considering amulet use without pre-supposing categories like magic, religion and superstition is suggested by the literature on economic and consumer psychology (e.g. Dittmar, 1992). A common procedure involves asking respondents to name particular, for example favourite, possessions and to give reasons why they are significant, and then performing a content analysis on the responses. Such an approach is an attempt to put the focus on respondents' own representations rather than on those of the researchers. Categories of significance that typically emerge in these studies include some that reflect the possession symbolizing aspects of a person's identity, either in individual terms (such as personal history or personal achievement) or in terms of their connectedness (to, for example, family, some other group, or to another individual), and others that relate to their use, often discussed in terms of control, sometimes in terms of emotional mediation. So, material possessions symbolize identity, mediate emotions and enhance perceived (or actual) control (Dittmar, 1992).

There are gender differences that tend to emerge in these studies: "women tend to construe their relation to their favored objects in a relational and symbolic manner, compared to men's activity-related, functional and self-oriented concerns" (Dittmar, 1992, p.135). However, few studies have attempted any cross-cultural comparison. One that does compares treasured possessions of people in rural Niger and urban U.S. (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). There are different coding schemes for the two sets of data, which does not allow direct comparison. The authors do report, though, that males in the sample from Niger named magico-religious objects more often than did females.

In the study described here, amulets are treated as material possessions: their meaning and significance are enquired about, and the content of the narrative responses is analyzed and compared with equivalent statements made about planned purchases (which are paradigmatic examples of contemporary ownership behavior). Both items are desirable material possessions: one (a planned purchase) deliberately acquired, the other (an amulet) deliberately kept. The fact that a similar method has been used before means that findings can be put in a context with previous research on material possessions. It also means that the development of a coding scheme can benefit from (and the scheme be compatible with) the literature.

For centuries there has been a strong counter-superstitious ideology (Abercrombie, Baker, Brett & Foster, 1970) in Protestant Europe (Tambiah, 1990). One would expect this to have some influence in the UK and (perhaps slightly less in) Canada, but the tradition in Japan has been far less hostile to practices like amulet use. One might, therefore, anticipate a higher frequency of amulet use on the part of the Japanese (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984; Swanger, 1981). As possessions reflect identity, one might anticipate cultural differences that follow the common findings (e.g. Hofstede, 1991) of, for example, greater emphasis on interdependence in Japan, and of individuality in Canada and the UK. As this is exploratory research, though, these are relatively speculative hypotheses.

Method

Respondents

The respondents in the present study were all students. In this way a similar level of exposure to contemporary higher education (which sometimes influences "superstitious" responses; Plug, 1976) was sought in each national sample. There were 117 UK respondents (70 females, 47 males) from the University of Sussex; 124 Canadian respondents (98 females and 26 males) from Queens University, Kingston, Ontario; and 121 Japanese students of education (41 females and 77 males, plus 3 who did not mark their gender) from Meiji University, Tokyo. The UK and Canadian students were studying a variety of major subjects.

Questionnaire

Respondents were asked (in a "Consumer Behaviour Survey") to name a major planned purchase, defined as "something which is of some importance to you ... [that] you decided to buy ... before you went into the shop." This item is taken from other consumer research literature (Dittmar, Beattie, & Friese 1996). Respondents were asked to state: (a) what the object was; (b) why it was important to them; and (c) on a percentage scale, how upset they would be to lose it. This last item allows a quantification of the difference between trivial and personally valuable objects.

They were also asked to name a personal amulet: The item wording included the terms "talisman," "amulet," "good luck charm" and "religious

symbols" to make clear what was being asked about. Again, respondents were asked to state what the object was, why it was important to them, and how upset they would be to lose it. Finally, on the basis of a previous finding that many amulets were gifts (Lewis, 2000) respondents were asked: "if it was a gift, who from?"

Coding

Two sets of codings were used for the content analysis of the responses. The first involves one coding decision for each object, namely what *type of object* it is. The second coding scheme, addressing the significance or *meaning of the object*, is more complex: statements are in respondents' own words and are of variable length, they have to be cut up into units of meaning, and each unit has to be coded. The two sets of codings that were used in the present study are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Codings for Object Type and Significance

Object types	Significance
jewellery	object
clothes	shared history
"utility"	use of object
"art" & "culture"	magico-religious function
money	technical function
"play & leisure"	social function
natural objects	cognitive-affective function
organisms & concepts	individual identity
Relatedness	

Most of the object type codings are self-explanatory. *Utility* includes tools and useful or functional items; *art & culture* includes decorative objects, art, music, writing; *play & leisure* includes children's toys as well as adults' leisure items, sports equipment etc. (A cd player would be *play & leisure*, a cd would be *art & culture*).

Of the significance categories, *object* refers to qualities intrinsic to the object; *shared history* includes comments that refer to acquisition or some

other aspect of the person's and object's shared story; *use of object* refers to how or when the object is actually used by the person; *cognitive-affective function* indicates the object being used to invoke memories or mediate emotion, or inspiring particular thoughts or motivations; the last two, *individual identity* and *relatedness* are to do with symbolizing aspects of identity (either individual or connected with others).

These two sets of codings, for what the object *is* and what it *means*, are quite distinct, and there should be no overlap: so, an object might be a ring, and be significant because "it was a gift from my Aunt, it reminds me of her." In the coding system for types of object a ring would be categorized as *jewellery*. In some studies, the statement "it was a gift from my Aunt, it reminds me of her" might be given a single "social meanings" coding (the example is adapted from Kamptner, 1991, where it would receive that coding). A more finely grained coding scheme is attempted here. Also, in order that each respondent's score contributes equally to the data, every respondent receives a total score of 100% which is divided proportionally across the significance categories into which the statement is coded. Table 2 shows how the above statement would be coded and scored in the present study.

Table 2
Coding and Scoring for Object Significance

Statement	Coding	Scoring (%)			
"it was a gift from my Aunt it reminds me of her"	<i>Gift</i>	25			
	<i>family/relationship</i>		25		
	<i>Memory</i>			25	
	<i>family/relationship</i>		25		
Total		25	50	25	100

The coding categories are grouped in a hierarchical arrangement, so there are several relationship codings, which group together. *Gift* is one of several methods of *acquisition* which are grouped together, and then grouped with others to form a "super-category" for statements that are concerned with the *shared history* between the object and the respondent.

As all respondents receive a total score of 100% for the significance categories, scoring cannot be more extreme as a result of response styles such as a Japanese tendency, for example, to be moderate in their responses compared to North American or other "Anglo" samples. Therefore, the three national samples are treated as a single data set for the content analyses.

Translation and Content Analysis

For all questionnaire materials, accepted back-translation procedures were used (Brislin, 1980; Van de Vijver & Leung, 1997) and Japanese versions were piloted. Despite the problem of translation, Brislin (1980) is firmly of the opinion that content analyses are possible in a cross-cultural context (and he gives several examples). Care in translation, and rigor, are key elements and one must, of course, be wary of imposing emic categories (Berry, 1989). This is particularly the case as the statements are brief, and the coding scheme aims at a fine-grained analysis.

The Japanese statements were translated into English with substantial margin notes (as Brislin, 1980, recommends) and then coded. Every coding decision was discussed with the translator. The aim of this was not only to confirm the accuracy of the coding to the Japanese meaning, but also of looking for "bits of meaning" either added or omitted by coding the translation, giving particular attention to the fact that communication in Japanese may be regarded as high-context (Gudykunst, 1998). This process resulted in the changing of a few coding decisions, but no new coding categories were added.

Results

All respondents named a planned purchase and most respondents were able to give an example of a personal amulet: 93% of the UK sample, 82% of the Canadians and 98% of the Japanese. Although more Japanese named an amulet they look, in raw score terms, less attached to them (i.e. they would be less upset to lose them). Comparison across cultures of these scores would beg questions regarding equivalence and culture related response sets (Van de Vijver and Leung, 1997). However, comparison within each national sample, of the relative importance of the amulets and purchases is possible. The UK and Canadian respondents would be

significantly more upset to lose their amulet ($t = 3.76, p < .0005$; $t = 4.83, p < .0005$ respectively) and the Japanese would be more upset to lose their purchase ($t = 2.34, p < .05$), although the difference was less marked in this case.

Types of Objects Named as Planned Purchases

There was significant cultural variation ($\chi^2_{14} = 48.13; p < .0001$) in what people name as major purchases. The categories *natural objects, organisms and concepts* and *money* are omitted, very few were named. *Clothes, utility items, art & culture* and *play & leisure* items were all popular purchases, *jewellery* less so. The Japanese named fewer *play & leisure* items (14.5%) and *clothes* (10%), although this does not mean that they buy fewer; they may not be major purchases or they may be impulse purchases. They named more *utility* (36.4%) and *art & culture* (30.9%) items than the other two nationalities. Canadians referred less frequently to *art & culture* items (11.4%), but more to *clothes* (34.1%) and (slightly more) to *jewellery* (8.1%) than the other two nationalities. The UK respondents named more *play & leisure* items (30.2%) than the other two nationalities and very few of them (1.7%) named *jewellery*.

Within each national sample, respondents were divided on a median split in terms of their attachment to their purchase (how upset they would be to lose it). A 2 (gender) x 2 (attachment to purchase) x 3 (nation) x 9 (significance categories) MANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor indicated a significant main effect for category; $F(8, 2608) = 78.13, p < .0005$. There was an overall effect for gender: $F(8, 2608) = 6.97, p < .0005$, with males scoring higher on the categories for *technical function* (which was by far the highest scoring category for male and female respondents) and *object* qualities, and females scoring slightly higher on the symbolic (*individual identity* and *relatedness*) and emotion mediating (*cognitive-affective*) categories.

There was also an interaction of nationality with attachment to the purchase: $F(8, 2608) = 1.71, p < .05$ (Figure 1). Japanese respondents referred more to qualities of the *object* itself and their *shared history* with it (often either effort put into acquisition or something planned to do with it). The Canadians referred more to the purchase's *technical function*; symbolizing identity, either in individual or related terms, was less frequently referred to than concern with the object's functional significance.

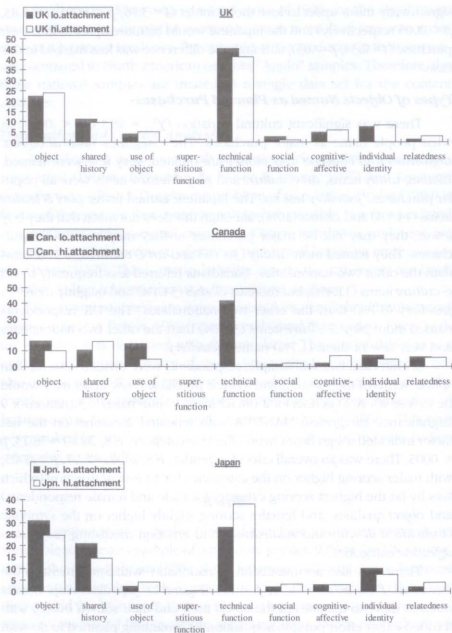


Figure 1

Significance of major purchases by "High" and "Low" Attachment.

To the limited extent that the purchases were associated with identity, it was *individual identity* more than *relatedness*, and slightly more so for the Japanese.

The UK respondents talked more about purchases to which they were less attached in terms of its *technical function*, whereas they talked more about the more personally valuable purchases in terms of their *cognitive-affective* capacity. This may relate to the fact that they named more *play & leisure* items. The Canadians were more concerned with the *technical function*, the *cognitive-affective* function and their *shared history* with the more highly valued purchases. The Japanese also referred to the *technical function* of the more important purchases. Overall, though, despite the differences, it would be true to say that the purchases were valued most (and quite substantially so) for their use-related or *technical function*.

Types of Object Used as Personal Amulets

Respondents' statements about their own amulet were also analyzed in terms of what these objects were, and why they were significant. There was considerable consistency across the three samples in objects named as amulets, most of which (UK: 64%; Canada: 79%; Japan: 73%) were items of *jewellery*. This consistency is confirmed by the absence of a statistical relationship between culture and object type ($\chi^2_{12} = 16.39$, *ns*). Objects in the *utility* (e.g. watch, lighter, penknife) and *art & culture* categories were named by between 5% and 15% respondents of all three nationalities. Objects in the other categories were named, but by fewer than 5% of respondents in each case.

As well as rings, bracelets, etc, the *jewellery* category included a coding for fobs (e.g. watch fobs, key fobs) which included Japanese *omamori* (often hung on bags or rear view mirrors; Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984, Swanger, 1981). Within the *jewellery* category, therefore, there was considerable difference in what was named, as 65% of the Japanese amulets coded as *jewellery* were fobs (i.e. *omamori*). Rings and necklaces were the most popular (around 40% each) among the Canadian and UK respondents.

Significance of Personal Amulets

Of greater psychological interest are the reasons why these objects are of importance to people. There was significant overall variation in the way these objects were referred to, a similar MANOVA to the one described

above indicated a main effect for category: $F(8, 2440) = 25.42, p < .0005$. There were also significant differences between male and female respondents across the three national samples: $F(8, 2440) = 2.05, p < .05$. The categories of significance that were emphasized more by males than females were *technical* and *magico-religious functions*, and the *cognitive-affective* categories. Female respondents placed more emphasis on the extent to which the object reflected *relatedness* to others and their *shared history* with the object, although it should not be overlooked that these were the two largest categories for males too.

There were also significant differences between the national samples: $F(16, 2440) = 4.04, p < .001$, which were mediated by the extent to which the person expressed attachment to their amulet: $F(16, 2440) = 1.77, p < .05$ (Figure 2), but not by gender. In terms of national differences, the *use of object* and *magico-religious function* categories was referred to more by the Japanese, who also referred more to *cognitive-affective* functions.

The Canadian and UK respondents placed more emphasis on their *shared history* with the object, and (particularly) the extent to which the object symbolized *relatedness*. By contrast, the extent to which these amulets symbolized *individual identity* (which was less than *relatedness* and *shared history*) was quite consistent across the three nationalities and across gender.

However, it is worthy of note that the more important Japanese amulets reflect *relatedness* more than the less important ones do; conversely, the less important ones are the ones about which more statements of *magico-religious function* are made. As the Canadian and UK amulets are, in general, more important (relative to the purchases) than the Japanese ones, it seems that the more important amulets across all three national samples are symbolic of *relatedness*. It is also true to say that amulets as a class of material possession are more relevant to symbolizing connections with others than individuality. They do symbolize *individual identity* but, on average, less than *relatedness*. They also mediate thought and emotion.

Amulets as Gifts

Finally, there were significant differences by gender across the three national samples ($\chi^2_5 = 20.60; p < .001$) and by nationality ($\chi^2_{10} = 41.51; p < .0001$) in whether amulets were *gifts* and, if so, who from: 90% of the UK respondents' amulets were gifts, 95% of the Canadian one's were and 68%

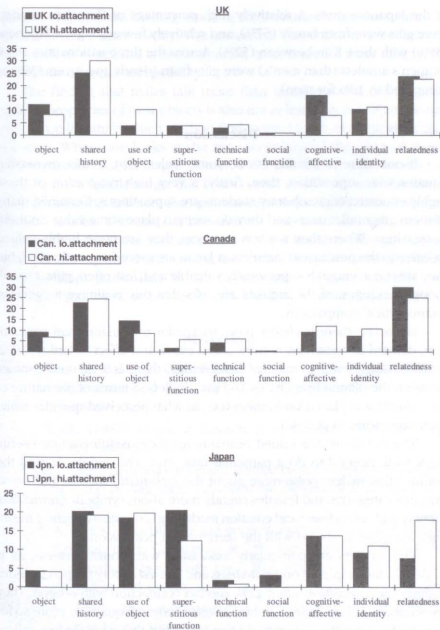


Figure 2

Significance of personal talismans by "High" and "Low" Attachment.

of the Japanese ones. A relatively high percentage of Canadian amulets were gifts from family (57%), and relatively few among the Japanese (35%) with the UK in between (52%). Across the three nationalities more women's amulets (than men's) were gifts from friends and lovers (39% as compared to 18% for men).

Discussion

If one were to assume (as do some scales) that amulet ownership equates with superstition, then, firstly, a very high proportion of these highly educated contemporary students are superstitious. Certainly, many of them are amulet users and they do seem to place some value on these possessions. Where they are less common, they are more highly valued (relative to the purchases). Amulets in Japan are more frequently used, but they are (on average) less personally valuable and, less often, gifts. Overall though, so many of the amulets are gifts that this is almost a "gifts vs. commodities" comparison.

However, there is clearly more to amulet ownership than superstition, defined as "mistaken notions about cause and effect" (Bartley, 1982, p.1264). Considered as material possessions, there is a marked contrast between the planned purchases and the amulets in terms of the nature of the value that is placed upon them (i.e., in what perceived qualities make them significant to people).

The purchases are valued primarily for their usefulness (are useful, work well, needed to do a particular task, etc). This emphasis, and the findings that males spoke more about the *technical function* and *object qualities* categories and females slightly more about symbolic (*individual identity* and *relatedness*) and emotion mediating (*cognitive-affective*) meanings, are quite in accord with the literature on possessions.

The amulets are particularly associated with connectedness, as is evident in the emphasis on *relatedness* and *shared history* (which includes codings for *acquisition*, often *gifts*, another connection with others). They are valued to some degree for their *magico-religious* qualities; more so for men and among the Japanese respondents, but these are far less salient than the *relatedness* and *shared history* codings. As the counter-superstitious ideology that is so strong in the protestant West does not have the same tradition in Japan, it is unsurprising that, as well as more of the

Japanese respondents owning amulets, they acknowledge this aspect of their significance more readily. The notion that "superstition" is associated with a lack of education is not supported here; it seems, more simply, to be a matter of social acceptability.

The finding that males talk more than females about the magico-religious properties of their objects is also not in line with the conventional superstition literature which tends to find women to be more superstitious than men. When one looks at the representations of the users of these "private piece[s] of solid magic" (Gorer, 1955, p.265) one might wonder if there is a more female magic that is to do with connectedness (Tambiah, 1990), because that is where the significance of these highly valued objects primarily resides. The contrast between the use orientated value of the purchases and the social connectedness that the amulets, often gifts, symbolize is a striking one. Furthermore, the finding that amulets are symbolic of relationships particularly in the cultures that are conventionally described as (and found to be) more individualistic is an intriguing one.

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