OBJECTS AS SYMBOLS FOR MEANING AND HAPPINESS

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By

Angela M. Snyder

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We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

[Signature]

Thesis or Project Director

[Signature]

Faculty Mentor

Gonzaga University

MA Program in Communication and Leadership Studies
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to determine if a specific meaning, and ultimately happiness, can be inferred from someone’s personal objects and how they interact with them. The scope of this study is limited to the investigation of one’s favorite objects located in the room within their residence where the participant spends the most time. This thesis focuses on the symbolism people associate with their personal items as a result of engagement with the culture and environment around them. This thesis will prove that people who have a positive connection with meaningful objects experience positive feelings because of what the object represents.

The philosophy of happiness from the viewpoints of Aristotle and Epicurus present a starting point to examine the material world. The motivation behind happiness, whether from an individualistic or community-focused perspective, is reflected in the physical world via personal objects. More, personal objects represent something meaningful to the owner and communicate about what makes the owner happy.

The theories of semiology and symbolic interactionism frame the paper in terms of determining meaning. Research for this paper was focused specifically on material objects, and their meaning and significance. Qualitative research was accomplished through a 10-question survey instrument, and data collected from 40 participants was reduced to determine if, in fact, personal items make participants happier. The outcome of this study is that the certain types of objects are indeed reflective of a person’s happiness, which implies one can be influenced by the intentional incorporation and placement of meaningful objects that inspire reflections of a person’s positive memories and feelings, and most importantly, happiness.

Keywords: communication, happiness, objects, environment, semiology, symbolic interactionism
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Aristotle, a famous Greek Philosopher, postulated that the pursuit of eudemonia should be the principal goal in a person’s life (Smith, 2017, p. 13). While others have directly translated his concept of *eudemonia* into “happiness,” it more specifically refers to the action of living (Smith, 2017, p. 13). It is through the action of living and focusing on those things that develop us that the goal of happiness is achieved (Smith, 2017, p. 140). Happiness alone does not keep us happy; meaning sustains happiness.

Contrary to Aristotle, Baumeister and Huta concluded that “the search for meaning is far more fulfilling than the pursuit of personal happiness” (Smith, 2017, pp.16-17). Albert Camus says that people need something to dedicate their life to, such as a mission or project, that one can find meaning in (Smith, 2017, p. 34). The time spent investing in pursuing the goal or attending to relationships is what gave the goal and relationships meaning” (Smith, 2017, p. 36). Smith goes on to say that “meaning arises from our relationships to others, having a mission tied to contributing to society, making sense of our experiences and who we are through narrative, and connecting to something bigger than the self” (2017, p.41). “Four in ten Americans,” Smith (2017) says, “have not discovered a satisfying life purpose,” and almost 25 percent of Americans do not know what “makes their lives meaningful” (p. 24). Is it possible to help people determine what brings them meaning, and possibly happiness?

This research seeks to understand what inanimate objects communicate about their owner’s values, the meaning attached to the objects, and their connection to happiness. The specific link between material possessions and a person’s happiness communicated through those items has not been widely studied. However, research has focused on how people feel in
relation to their material possessions (Kirk & Sellen, 2010), and the mechanism through which people non-verbally communicate (Gosling, 2009).

Other studies have focused on the definition of happiness, where most participants said psychological happiness is a “balanced and positive connectedness perceived among various facets of the self” (Delle Fave et al., 2016, p.19). One researcher looked at luxury cars to attempt to correlate happiness to vehicle ownership (Okulicz-Kozaryn, Nash, & Tursi, 2015). Another study focused on the material possessions of older adults living in care facilities and the symbolic importance placed upon their possessions (Phenice & Griffore, 2013). A fourth study asked the question “is happiness having what you want, wanting what you have, or both?” (Larsen & McKibban, 2008, p. 371).

The area of communication theory that is the basis for this thesis is interpersonal communication; specifically, non-verbal interaction. The meaning of objects will be deconstructed using the theory of symbolic interactionism to explain the relationship the owner has with the object, and semiology to describe the significance of the “sign” (the object). Research completed in other studies described in this study supports symbolic interactionism and semiology as cornerstones of determining happiness from meaning.

Importance of the Study

Studies covering a broad range of material possessions, from mere memorabilia (Phenice & Griffore, 2013) to those having financial value (Okulicz-Kozaryn, Nash, & Tursi, 2015), have yielded information on the significance attached to them. There is a clear correlation between one’s personal values, for example if one is more concerned with financial prosperity versus positive relationships, and the possessions he or she holds in the highest esteem (Kirk & Sellen,
In short, objects that were purchased as a display of wealth did not necessarily predict a person’s happiness (Okulicz-Kozaryn, Nash, & Tursi, 2015). Additionally, positive relationships with family and friends are deemed to be significant factors in personal happiness (Delle Fave et al., 2016, p.19). Turley and O’Donahue looked at the relationship grieving people had with inanimate objects to determine the object’s significance (2013), while Bryant, Smart, and King determined that people do use inanimate objects as tool for reminiscing about positive memories (2005). These researchers provide evidence of the link between object acquired with emotional significance to family and friends.

Therefore, the importance of this study is to definitively determine if the way in which a person displays or interacts with meaningful objects can determine a person’s happiness. When people travel for work and bring along family photos, decorate their work spaces, or give gifts, they are typically emotionally interacting with the objects. These items could be considered reminders of something important to them, as Bryant, Smart, and King learned (2005). However, it is important to dig deeper to understand what type of things people have an affinity for, and what their importance is to learn if that thing represents “happiness,” which can be connected to a happy memory or a happy feeling. This research is important because the findings can be applied to better enhance the lives and emotional wellness of people who are away from home for extended periods of time, such as in the military or away at college, or those in fragile situations such as grieving a loved one as examples. It is assumed that meaning and happiness are basic human needs. If one can determine what makes these people happy, inferred from significance and meaning, then suggestions can be made for the types of items that could be given as gifts or as mementoes which would increase the chances of positively impacting a
person’s wellbeing. Alternatively, these results can be applied as a means of understanding what happiness might be “missing” in a person’s life.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to investigate the connection of meaning to happiness, and happiness to the ownership of inanimate objects. More specifically, the following pages are concerned with determining one’s level of happiness as communicated through the significance given to his or her most valued possessions. Further, this research is most interested in how one displays his or her possessions and how one interacts with their possessions as a means of communicating their happiness related to a specific item. Examples of this include the type of vehicle one owns and where it is stored, the various personal artifacts (pictures, awards, memorabilia) in a person’s house and where they are located in relation to the most public rooms of the house (kitchen and dining rooms), and where costly versus meaningful objects are located and displayed.

Research shows that people who have a connection with meaningful objects experience a higher satisfaction than those who do not (Phenice & Griffore, 2013). The intent of this research is to inform the relationship of personal items and happiness (or personal satisfaction), how personal possessions are displayed, and what those items communicate about the person’s happiness. Mead’s symbolic interactionism theory (people communicate with each other through symbols) and Barthes semiology theory (symbols that appear to be straightforward but subtly communicate other ideas, values, or connotations) is the basis from which this research paper is being developed and for theoretical discussion (Griffin, 2009).
Definition of Terms Used

**Happiness:** There are many definitions of happiness. In one study, researchers asked over 2700 urban adults comprised of 12 different nationalities to define psychological and contextual happiness (Delle Fave et al., 2016, p.4). Participants had varying religious backgrounds, ages, genders, and marital statuses (Delle Fave et al., 2016, p.4). Additionally, cultural collectivism and individualism were compared to the responses (Delle Fave et al., 2016, p.4).

When surveyed, respondents most frequently defined happiness in terms of psychological wellbeing and said that it was an internal feeling or mindset (Delle Fave et al., 2016, p.6). Positive family relationships and interconnectedness were the most frequently reported definitions of contextual happiness followed by the positive welfare of family and friends (Delle Fave et al., 2016, p.6). In fact, most all respondents mentioned positive interpersonal relationships and personal satisfaction in some form as their basis for happiness (Delle Fave et al., 2016). Culturally speaking, collectivist participants valued contextual happiness more than individualistic participants who were more focused on intrinsic wellbeing (Delle Fave et al., 2016, p.18).

Aristotle (2014) says that both ordinary and sophisticated people agree that the definition of happiness is equated with “living well and doing well” (p. 14). The meaning of happiness, however, is not the same for both ordinary and sophisticated people (Aristotle, 2014). Differing opinions believe happiness is rooted in wealth, some in pleasure, and others in honor (Aristotle, 2014, p. 14). Aristotle posits that happiness is an action that is connected to living a virtuous life; the good life (2014, p. 187). In general, Aristotle says that one must have a purpose that drives them, the result of which is happiness (2014).
For this paper, happiness is defined as a positive feeling associated with an emotional response.

**Meaning:** Signified is the assignment of a representation or concept that is applied to a sign or symbol by the person assigning it (Barthes, 1964, p. 43). The term “signified” is used interchangeably with “meaning.”

**Semiology:** Semiology is the study of a system of signs, such as objects, sounds, or colors, and the significance associated with them that may be different from the originally intended meaning (Barthes, 1964, pp. 10-11).

**Sign/Symbol:** A sign/symbol is made up of both a signifier and that which is signified (Barthes, 1964, p.35). The terms “object” and “person item” are used interchangeably with “sign” and “symbol.”

**Symbolic Interactionism:** Symbolic interactionism is the theory that people interact with things in their physical environment based on the meanings of people have given them (Blumer, 1986, p. 2). The meaning derived from social interactions is what people apply to their physical environment (Blumer, 1986, p. 2). Therefore, the product of the meaning is formed and characterized by the interpretations formed by the person about their environment (Blumer, 1986, p. 2).

**Organizing of Remaining Chapters**

The remaining four chapters include a literature review, the scope and methodology of the research, the results of the study, and the summary and conclusion. The literature review will cover philosophical assumptions, the theoretical basis of the paper including references to additional research conducted, the rationale for preparing this thesis, and added research
questions that have emerged from the review of the literature. The scope and methodology section will describe the means and methods of the research conducted for this paper. An introduction to the study itself and a discussion of the results will be included in the study section. Finally, the summary and conclusion section will provide commentary on the findings, the limitations of the study, and any additional conclusion that may have arisen from this research.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Philosophical and Ethical Assumptions

**An Introduction to the Thinkers.** The philosophy of happiness has been written about by countless authors interested in the pursuit of and sustainability of happiness. Thinkers from the Classical Greek thinkers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in the 300-400’s BC, Saint Thomas Aquinas in the 1200’s, Niccolò Machiavelli in the 1400-1500’s, Renè Descartes in the 1600’s, Voltaire and Kant in the 1700’s, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche in the 1800’s, through Ayn Rand in the 1900’s were all interested in the study of the human condition and happiness of some form (Hardwood, 2010). Some were interested on how to achieve it, others theorized that there are rules to happiness. With an infinite number of perspectives on happiness, it is impossible to distill the pursuit and achievement of it into a simple formula. Rather, to understand how complicated happiness is, a happiness enthusiast might review some of these perspectives and their implications.

For example, Plato’s position was that a person’s happiness depended on the larger community and the personal attainment of perfection in reflection of the greater order (Herman, 2014, p. 62). Aristotle, in contrast, is said to have believed that in order for people to flourish they should be encouraged to realize their individual potential as opposed to forced submission to the greater order (Herman, 2014, p. 62). Individuality versus solidarity and democracy versus communism were, and are still, two worldviews to sustaining happiness (Herman, 2014, p. 62).

More than 2,000 years later Nietzsche would vehemently argue that both Plato and Aristotle were not only wrong, but that the pre-Socratics were the right in their stances on life (Herman, 2014, p. 497). He says there is no difference between good and evil, everything is impermanent, there is no such thing as being a part of something greater, so people should accept
and find peace with their destiny of living in constant flux (Herman, 2014, p. 497). His primary target was Socrates because rather than be content with the fate of never-ending change Socrates “first made men look to the heavens for truth and happiness” (Herman, 2014, p. 498). Socrates and Plato created the idea of good versus evil, with the result being a rise of logic and reason and the downfall of spontaneous instinct and inspiration (Herman, 2014, p. 498).

**Aristotle’s Ethics of Happiness.** Aristotle is perhaps the most influential and impactful philosopher on the evolution of humanistic development, essentially the development of the self in contrast with a focus on the divine (Herman, 2014). Among his works is a full manifesto on how to live well: *The Nicomachean Ethics*. The greatest good than anyone can achieve, says Aristotle, is happiness (Rackham, 1996, p. 5). Living well is the same as being happy, as is doing well (Rackham, 1996, p. 5).

However, what happiness is, what it is made of, is in dispute according to Aristotle (Rackham, 1996, p. 5). “Ordinary people identify it with some obvious and visible good, such as pleasure or wealth or honour” (Rackham, 1996, pp. 5-6). “There exists another good,” Aristotle says, “that is good in itself, and stands to all those goods as the cause of their being good” (Rackham, 1996, p. 6). Truly, the motives behind doing and being good and the getting versus giving those things attached to goodness frame the ideal good (Rackham, 1996, pp. 8-10). Whether the good is the means to an end or as enough in itself was debatable, but happiness itself “appears to be absolutely final…since we always choose it for its own sake and never as a means to something else” (Rackham, 1996, p. 11). “Honour, pleasure, intelligence, and excellence in its various forms” are chosen because of the belief that these are the means of becoming happy, “but no one chooses happiness for the sake of honour, pleasure, etc., nor as a
means to anything whatever other than itself” (Rackham, 1996, p. 11). Moreover, experience momentary happiness does not necessarily make one happy (Rackham, 1996, p. 13).


**The Art of Happiness.** Epicurus, a Greek philosopher who lived during the 300-200s BC, studied atoms and postulated that atoms exist because things exist, and things must be made from something (Strodach, 2012). He believed that everything is influenced by something, and that something is atoms (Strodach, 2012). Epicurus argued, among other things, that atoms influence the senses, which are evidence of one’s current state of morality (Strodach, 2012, pp. 29-30). Consequently, pleasure is an indicator of moral goodness, and the feeling of pain marks moral corruption (Strodach, 2012, p. 30). Succinctly said, if it feels good it must be a good thing to do.

There is more to Epicurus, of course. In a letter to Menoeceus, Epicurus frames what the good life looks like and the knowledge one must have to gain happiness (Strodach, 2012, p. 135). He advises Menoeceus that there are desires that are natural, and those that are not, some of which are necessary and others not (Strodach, 2012, p.158). Some desires are required to secure happiness, some as a means to liberate oneself from discomfort, and some to nourish and maintain life (Strodach, 2012, 158). The goals of a happy life are in keeping the unpleasantness at bay and in maintaining one’s overall health (Strodach, 2012, p. 158). Epicurus warns that not all pleasure leads to more pleasure, and sometimes pain actually does lead to pleasure; pleasure is complicated (Strodach, 2012, pp. 159-160). Regardless, Epicurus echoes Aristotle’s wisdom
in that the good life coincides with virtue, and virtue is rooted in good judgement (Strodach, 2012, p.160). The secret to happiness is being good.

**Theoretical Basis**

The basis of this thesis is developed from the idea that happiness is a reflection of good things; a good life, being good, and/or doing good things. Material objects are evidence, such as Epicurus postulated, of the good (or bad) in people’s lives. More, what it means to be good, and consequently happy, are reflected in one’s material world. Fundamentally, this paper examines a person’s material world to make sense of the inner psyche.

People spend time, money, and attention on the acquisition of personal objects as means of adornment or as a reminder of some important event. The nature of the items that people include in their environments is significant because these items represent a mirror of the person’s inner psychology. That is to say, objects are not randomly chosen or placed in one’s personal space. People include tangible artifacts in their lives because the objects have meaning. In fact, everything that surrounds people means something. One can look to the Italian Renaissance and the idea of “magnificence” as an example of the impact of meaning and significance on history as a whole.

Humans rely, whether consciously or not, on non-verbal communication to interact with the world around them. The deconstruction of these interactions can be evaluated using Roland Barthes’ theory of semiology and George Herbert Mead’s theory of symbolic interactionism. These theories are concerned with understanding what that “something” means and how the meaning can be interpreted.

Semiology was formulated as a means of making sense of the incongruences between what a culture says an object is and what might be used for, and the mental image a specific
person may have for that same object (Barthes, 1964). It is a statement calling for a deeper critical exploration of the journey from cultural object to mental picture, and connections a person makes with items. Certainly, it is an opportunity to contrast and compare an individual’s thought process and identity with the cultural norms framing their everyday worldview.

Symbolic interactionism is a theory that has been formulated to describe interactions people have with the world around them. The essence of symbolic interactionism theory is that exchanges between people, or people and objects, have meaning, and the ways in which people respond to others or objects communicate the meaning of the other people or object (Blumer, 1986). This idea seems to loop around itself and tie itself into knots, presenting confusing and an impetus for unraveling the core idea to be discussed in this paper; people do not react to objects, they react to the meaning of objects.

This thesis is rooted in observations made that people acquire objects and display things that have meaning to them. Is it possible that a pineapple scented candle, a “paradise” wall calendar, and mini-tiki statue collectively symbolize an experience that someone had and wants to relive the memories of? Or when someone says “remember that time we [insert memory here],” a specific object comes to mind? What about a person’s newfound affinity to a symbol, such as the Air Force logo; what does this communicate? Is the stack of books on someone’s end table, the stuffed llama perfectly placed on a bed, or the various pictures in frames sitting on fireplace mantles meaningful?

More, what does that say about the person’s experience? The primary assumption in this paper is there is a clear connection between the item and an experience of some kind, and that the connection is an emotional one. Additionally, the arrangement of those items communicate about the person’s state of being and present a mode of interaction with the object. This mode of
interaction further defines the relationship one has with another person or memory associated with the object. It could be said that one shares an identity with the object. Understanding how objects can give insight on hidden meaning and motivations can serve as a gateway to better understand a person’s emotions and relationships, and ultimately happiness.

“The world is inherently orderly,” says Wheatley (2006, p. 20). She says that in living systems, individuals retain their personal sense of identity within the overall network (Wheatley, 2006, p. 20). Still, individuals within the network recognize they are part of the entire system (Wheatley, 2006, p. 20). Since the group observes differences among individuals, Wheatley argues that a person must learn to adapt and participate in the orderly network of relationships if they are to survive (2006, p. 20). Within this system, communication is occurring between the parts and as a whole (Wheatley, 2006, p. 151). Wheatley argues that information that is meaningful is shared within the group, but information that is not dies out (Wheatley, 2006, p. 151). The network will share “only what it decides is meaningful” [and significant] (Wheatley, 2006, p. 151).

Semiology identifies three components of a sign, and describes the relationship between them; the object (or symbol), the signifier (what the thing actually is), and the signified (what the thing represents) (Barthes, 1964, pp. 35-41). In short, this theory says that an object acts as both the primary signifier and the signified (Barthes, 1964). Semiology considers the signified, or the representation of the object, as the most relevant of the components (Barthes, 1964, pp. 42-43). Whatever mental image a person has that is projected onto an object is not necessarily the same as what the object is (Barthes, 1964, pp. 45-46). Further, whatever the signified is, say a warm, sunny day, in relation to the object, a pineapple (the sign) for example, occurs through a process called signification that Barthes (1964) says “is the act which binds the signifier and the
signified, an act whose product is the sign” (p. 48). Thus, semiology is interested in the journey taking the thing to “something” meaningful.

Symbolic interactionism centers on the premise that “the meanings that things have for human beings are central in their own right” (Blumer, 1986, p. 3). That is to say, people act towards certain objects based in the meaning a person has assigned to the object (Blumer, 1986, p. 2). Blumer (1986) says that “the meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing” (p. 4). He goes on to say that meanings are formed through the process of the defining of interactions based on one’s interpretation of the interaction (Blumer, 1986, p. 5). Thus, a person’s object can communicate the person’s feelings about someone or something through the meaning they have created borne out of the actions of the social engagements.

Blumer (1986) says that when humans respond to each other, the reactions and behaviors are based on the relationships that have been developed between people (pp. 7-8). It is the associations and social interactions that people have with one another that influence the reactions and interactions a person has with the objects that surround them (Blumer, 1986). It is precisely because people live in a world filled with “stuff” that there is a need to explore the activities formed around that “stuff” (Blumer, 1986, p. 68).

“Objects are human constructs,” says Blumer (1986, p. 68). Like Barthes, Blumer (explaining Mead’s position) says that objects are not “self-existing entities with intrinsic natures,” but “dependent on the orientation and action of people toward them” (1986, p. 68). Meaning arises from how people react/act towards the object (Blumer, 1986, pp. 68-69). Further, people do not just respond to objects, but organize their response to the object by
assessing what it is, what they think about it, how they feel about it, if they are going react/act toward it, and determine a plan of action if they do (Blumer, 1986, p. 69). This is considered the “attitude” of the person (Blumer, 1986, p. 93). The product of the reaction is dependent on the socially constructed meaning formulated through social interactions with others and the world (Blumer, 1986, p. 69).

More importantly, the attitude of a person, considered to be a tendency a person has to react or prepare for something, drives the action of the resulting behavior (Blumer, 1986, p. 93). Blumer says knowledge of a person’s attitude towards something gives an observer the ability to predict what will happen once the attitude toward the object is “activated” (1986, p. 93). He is clear to point out that the attitude or tendency should not be taken as a guarantee that a person will react or behave in a certain way (Blumer, 1986, p. 97). Rather, these are characteristics that are only a part of the process of a resulting action (Blumer, 1986, p. 97). Still, the study of these attitudes can provide insight into how people forge meaning.

Blumer admits that the study of social psychology of humans is centered on group and individual experience, and the influences on the perceptions and realities of the individuals that result from social interactions (1986, p. 102). The research is based on the observations of the conception of the schema, the analogical comparisons made from group behavior, through the speculation of future behavior based on the current behaviors observed within the group, and through empirical anthropological studies (Blumer, 1986, pp. 104-106). Narrowing down the dependent and independent variables as the basis for interpretation of constructed meaning is challenging because of the quality the researcher assigns to them (Blumer, 1986, pp 134-135). Variables must be characterized such that the researcher’s interpretation is valid (Blumer, 1986, p. 135).
The Literature

**Introduction to the Review.** The review of literature includes discussion on symbolism, the concept of meaning and how it is created, and the application of these to happiness. Symbolic interaction theory and semiology theory discussed in this chapter provides structure for the research presented in later chapters. The literature covers reminiscing about events or relationships, how thinking about happiness affects one’s well-being, and differentiating material objects with monetary value from objects that hold value because of the meaning attached to them. Additionally, this chapter touches on the significance of what a person has, where and how they display it, and the practice of creating happiness.

**Symbolism.** From consumerism to linguistics, semiology has been used to gain greater insight into the buying habits of consumers (Mick, 1986). Corporations want to stay ahead of the marketing game by investigating trends in purchasing and the changing variables guiding trends. There are varying perspectives the application and study of semiology, but the end product is to identify how meaning is created and changes over time (Mick, 1986, p. 201). Consumers are “hooked” into purchasing when the intrinsic features of an item are exploited with additional symbolism, and the consumer has identified that idea as something they want to own (Mick, 1986, p. 201).

Marketing and advertising professionals know that they must be in tune to the attitudes and preferences of consumers in order to influence consumers’ perception of the product’s representation of reality (Mick, 1986, pp 203-204). Human’s make choices about their lives in part because of the exploration and learning that happens within the sociocultural context (Mick, 1986, p. 206). Through social interactions, including the exposure to other beliefs and attitudes, people learn what should be important to them and what is not (Mick, 1986, p. 206).
While this idea of advertising and marketing in modern times may feel trivial, uninspiring, and “cookie-cutter,” it might help to revisit the birth of Humanism during the Italian Renaissance to enrich the discussion of meaning and happiness. A glance back into the late 1400’s reveals how important the visual constructs were to the Florentine culture (Howard, 2008, p. 326). The term “magnificence” has been used to describe the material culture in which Renaissance Italians enjoyed, though this outward expression was intended as a reflection that the community as a whole was indeed “magnificent” (Howard, 2008, p. 327). At that time, magnificence was an esteemed virtue, and buildings and artworks of time were a visual representation of the Church’s solution to a moral problem; sin (Howard, 2008, pp. 332-334). Florence is rich in color, texture, and style with the symbolism of the glory of something greater than herself. Moving forward, this paper will explore the threads of symbolism and modern applications of outward expression.

**Meaning.** Getting to the heart of meaning and significance means looking beyond the utility of an object or the monetary value attached to it (McCracken, 1986, p. 71). “Usually, cultural meaning is drawn from a culturally constituted world and transferred to a consumer good,” says McCracken (1986, p. 71). Further, meaning is transitory both from the object to the customer and from the customer to the object, as well as over time (McCracken, 1986, p. 71). Meaning is rooted in how humans create culture surrounding “class, status, gender, age, and occupation” (McCracken, 1986, p. 72). Transference of meaning occurs through rituals of possession, rituals of exchange, grooming, and divestment (McCracken, 1986, p. 72). There is not necessarily a reason or impetus for these changes, no particular order, and no immediate structure or order (McCracken, 1986, p. 72).
Cultural categories, says McCracken (1986), are the basic building blocks of a complicated system that, for North Americans in particular, give individuals the ability to declare which of these they represent and further identify themselves in connection with the vast network of human culture (p. 72). Each category has certain social rules that require conformity of the individual to be considered part of the whole (McCracken, 1986, p. 73). Visual representations of what it means to be a part of these categories can be found in homes, clothing, art, and other material possessions (McCracken, 1986, p. 73). Each item is a tangible expression of cultural meaning (McCracken, 1986, p. 73).

There is yet another layer of meaning beyond self-identification. Objects represent values and cultural principles of group organization and social life (McCracken, 1986, p. 73). For cultural principles and values to have meaning, they must be mutually understood and acknowledged by both the individual and the collective (McCracken, 1986, p. 73).

**The How and Where.** The how and where of what people do with their things might be explained by proxemics, which is the study how humans perceive and utilize their space (Hall et al., 1968, p. 83). Proxemics is concerned with human behavior and claiming territory (Hall et al., 1968, p. 83). The relationship between space and time depends somewhat on cultural norms and traditionally accepted attitudes and beliefs (Hall et al., 1968, p. 84). In fact, people from two different cultures going through the same event at the same time may experience it far differently because of the social and cultural programming each has been exposed to over the course of their lives (Hall et al., 1968, p. 84). What one person may experience as being uncomfortable, another may not (Hall et al., 1968, p. 84).

Edward Hall’s interest in the perception of space and time led him to focus research on identifying the various components of personal space (1968, pp. 87-88). Hall’s methods of
investigation included “observation, experiment, interviews (structured and unstructured),
analysis of English lexicon, and the study of space as it is recreated in literature and art (Hall et
al., 1968, p. 88). Through observation, Hall learned that the observer still interacts with their
study subject even if they had not meant to (Hall et al., 1968, p. 88). For example, one of Hall’s
students, who is German, was asked to take photos and describe why they took certain shots
(Hall et al., 1968, p. 88). The “public” photo of the same subject was intentionally blurred
whereas the “private” interpersonal phot was clear because the student’s cultural frame of
reference is people don’t look directly at each other in public (Hall et al., 1968, p. 88).

Hall used structured interviews to explore the observer’s perception of their own personal
space with respect to “privacy, boundaries, the rights of propinquity, and the place of the
particular home in its social and geographic setting” (Hall et al., 1968, p. 89). Hall found that
Arab people who responded to a question normal to American culture, “where do you go to be
alone,” their answers pointed to the Arabian cultural norm of not wanting to be alone (Hall et al.,
1968, p. 89).

These perceptions, Hall argues, are both learned and follow patterns (Hall et al., 1968, p.
89). However, as in the case of viewing artwork, the observer must comprehend the cultural
constructs within the art in order to receive the message the artist intended to present (Hall et al.,
1968, p. 89). All of this depends on knowing and understanding the meaning of those elements
represented in the piece (Hall et al., 1968, p. 89). When the observer stands at just the right
distance from the artwork, which is a consequence of cultural perceptions of space, and if they
are culturally knowledgeable about what the art is intending to depict, the observer will see the
piece clearly (Hall et al., 1968, p. 89).
In the case of personal space, cultures treat this concept differently (Hall et al., 1968, p. 91). Hall points to another German subject who bolted furniture to the floor treating space as fixed, where Americans treat furniture as moveable (Hall et al., 1968, p. 91). Hall says that people who experience deviations from familiar personal space norms may start to become anxious and uncomfortable (Hall et al., 1968, p. 91). Who knew furniture could be an emotional subject?

**Staking Claims.** The study of the meaning and significance of personal objects is but one subset of a bigger picture; the need for territoriality. A paper written by Jean Hayter, though written primarily about patients and nursing, addresses a driving need within humans to delineate their personal space (1981). Hayter’s findings are relevant to this paper because of their application to staking territorial claims in terms of personal items.

On the macroscale, creating territory is a means of creating a sense of control and having the power to determine how that space is used or behaved in (1981, p. 79). A territorial claim can be staked when a person uses the terms “I,” “mine,” or “my,” as examples when referring to the ownership of something (Hayter, 1981, p. 79). A person compartmentalize spaces which they consider more public, such as a yard or porch, from private spaces that are considered to be by invitation only, such as the living room or beyond (Hayter, 1981, p. 80). Somewhere in the middle is an area where invaders are vetted to determine if a threat is imminent or if the invader is safe to allow beyond the initial boundary (Hayter, 1981, p. 80). However, territorialism is more than marking out a space.

“Security, privacy, autonomy, and self-identity” are said to be the basic functions of territoriality (Hayter, 1981, p. 80). People feel safer when they have control over a space, and when the space has been modified to fit that person’s needs and desires there is a decrease in
anxiety (Hayter, 1981, p. 80). Additionally, privacy of one’s space allows that person to feel more comforted and relaxed (Hayter, 1981, p. 80). A person can choose whether they want to entertain guests or to be alone, or to engage in social interactions such as talking on the phone or not (Hayter, 1981, p. 80). Further, a person can express themselves within their space by personalizing it according to their interests and values (Hayton, 1981, p. 80). “This can be done through decorations, furniture arrangements, organization of the space, and through having a variety of articles with personal meaning associated with them immediately at hand” (Hayter, 1981, p. 81).

Factors, such as age and gender, influence the drive for territoriality (Hayter, 1981, p. 81). For example, adolescents tend to have a stronger need for establishing their own space because their degree of autonomy is dependent on their parents/living situation, where older adults have a strong need because of the fear that their autonomy may have to be given up (Hayter, 1981, p. 81). Having one’s own autonomy and space symbolizes independence (Hayter, 1981, p. 81). In terms of gender, males are more likely desire more space (and “sacred” space reserved for them) than females, and feel more upset when their territory has been entered (Hayter, 1981, p. 81). However, females are less likely than males to invade another’s space (Hayter, 1981, p. 81).

On a smaller scale, a person can stake their claim through the use of personal items to communicate where they fit in the world. Personal items serve multiple purposes. Personal property is both functional and provides a status signal regarding one’s place in the overall social and economic hierarchy (Davidson, 2009, p. 759). Functionally, property serves as a means to meet basic needs (Davidson, 2009, pp. 759-760). For example, “money enables exchange and
investment; food provides sustenance; books entertain and inform; buildings shelter a myriad of significant and trivial aspects of life; and so forth” (Davidson, 2009, p. 760).

At the same time, property communicates information about likes and dislikes, who a person is and what they stand for, and who a person is in relationship to others (Davidson, 2009, p. 760). Personal items communicate about one’s economic status and socioeconomic culture (Davidson, 2009, p. 760). They communicate about the relative equality a person experiences in the world (Davidson, 2009, p. 760). More, they communicate about the subtle details of a person’s life, such as the culture a person ascribes to and the categories they identify with (gender, ethnicity, age as a few examples) (Davidson, 2009, p. 760). In short, the process of acquisition and discarding communicates a person’s navigational process in self-development, identity construction, relationships, overall status in the world, and what differentiates one person from another (Davidson, 2009, p. 764, p. 777).

**Interacting.** According to interactionist theorists, people develop their social/emotional environments to reflect and reinforce their attitudes, beliefs, values, preferences, and worldview (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, p. 379). Additional research supports the belief that people also construct their physical environments to mirror those same features (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, p. 379). “People choose colors, patterns, motifs, and décor that fit their own personal taste and aesthetic” (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, p. 380). Moreover, the preferences and placement of various adornments (paint colors, posters, mementos, and etcetera) serve as a messaging system which conveys specific information about their view of themselves, how they view others, and how they participate in shared meaning with their world (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, p. 380).
Gosling and a team of researchers investigated the correlation between dorm rooms and the occupant’s personalities in 1997 to determine if conclusions could be made about their values (2009, p. 11). Gosling’s team found that people engaged with their personal spaces through “identity claims, feeling regulators, and behavioral residue” (2009, p. 11).

“Identity claims” include items such as pictures, awards, knick-knacks, and memorabilia that are both symbolic and are specifically directed at either oneself or towards another (Gosling, 2009, pp. 12-13). These items symbolize how one sees themselves or how one views the world around them (2009, p. 3). Those objects that are other-directed are intended to relay messages rooted in shared meaning (Gosling, 2009, p. 13). How and where these objects are placed indicates specific messaging about the object’s significance as well as a person’s values (Gosling, 2009). Gosling (2009) says that the differences in one’s private space, such as a living room or dining room, versus their public space, such as a bedroom or private study, reflect the various psychological divisions within a person’s life (pp. 18-19). For example, the orientation of a photo might send a signal of “I love my family” if positioned toward the owner or “this is mine” if pointed toward a visitor (Gosling, 2009, p. 19).

A “feeling regulators” are those things that a person might use to elicit memories, focus on an idea, or get emotionally prepared for an event (Gosling, 2009, p. 21). A room specifically designed with overstuffed chairs, soft colors, and candles might invoke rest and relaxation. Alternatively, a collection of classic rock albums could stimulate action. One person Gosling describes has a photo taped to the inside cupboard so that he can look at it and reminisce whenever he likes, but not be overwhelmed by it having to see it all the time effectively regulating his emotional state (2009, p. 24).
“Behavioral residue,” Gosling (2009) says, “refer(s) to the physical traces left in the environment by our everyday actions” and says something “about a person’s traits, values, and goals” (p. 25). More than just the physical aspect of the “fingerprint” is the consistency in repetitive behavior that points to unique personality traits (Gosling, 2009, p. 28). Discarded forgotten items are particularly interesting because they reveal behaviors and events that have already happened, and because the owner has dismissed them from needing immediate attention and impression management (Gosling, 2009, p. 30). For instance, a trash can full of take-out boxes give clues about a person’s eating habits. Thus, behavioral residue allows one to predict future interactions a person will have with their environment (Gosling, 2009, p. 28).

To validate these claims, Gosling’s team formulated four categories of questions as the guiding framework for their observational research; “Do observers agree about individual’s personalities on the basis of their personal environments; Are observer’s impressions correct; Which cues in personal environments do observers use to form their impressions, and which cues are valid; How do stereotypes used by observers affect consensus and accuracy?” (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, pp. 382-384).

Seven observers examined the living spaces (specifically, bedrooms) of 83 occupants, including college students (or those who had recently graduated) (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, p. 389). The average age of the participants was 22, the cross section of ethnicity (of those who were willing to share) was 42% Asian, 36% White, 22% other, 24 of which were male and 54 were female (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, p. 389). Each observer rated a person’s room without instructions as to what basis they should be making their observations (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, p. 389). Any indication of the resident’s identity, for example photos and names, were covered prior to beginning the examination
(Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, p. 389). Finally, the occupants provided self-reports of the degree of “Extroversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and Openness to Experience” (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, p. 389).

It was found that the greatest consensus among observers was for Openness to Experience and Contentiousness (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, p. 390). Extroversion and Agreeableness were also among higher consensus (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, p. 390). Observers did not have good consensus with respect to Emotional Stability (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, p. 390). Observers were most accurate when rating the categories of Openness, Contentiousness, and Emotional Stability, but far much less accurate for Agreeableness and Extroversion (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, p. 390).

When it came to rating the five categories using physical cues, Contentiousness was correlated to clean and organized, while inviting and comfortable (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, p. 390). Openness was judged on the decoration and characteristics of the room, and of the audio and visual media present (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, p. 390). Warmth and trust were among the descriptors for Agreeableness, and agreeable people were perceived to be clean and neat while surrounding themselves with cheerful and colorful elements (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, p. 390). While the cues for these characteristics were validated, Extroversion and Emotional Stability did not have high levels of correlation to cues (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, p. 390).

Finally, the study found that stereotypes of sex and race had a higher consensus for Agreeableness and Emotional Stability (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, p. 392). Additionally, White residents were said to be more open, extroverted, and emotionally stable
than their Asian counterparts (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, p. 390). Also, White residents were judged to be far less agreeable than Asian residents (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, p. 390). Conversely, Asian people were assumed to be more conscientious (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, p. 390). While this says a lot about one’s perception of another’s personal space and possessions, it does not quite correlate objects with happiness.

What about irreplaceability? Research conducted on the categorization of special objects looked at the predictability of determining which objects are irreplaceable through indexicality (Grayson & Shulman, 2000, p.19). They used the precepts of semiology as a basis for their exploration (Grayson & Shulman, 2000).

Grayson and Shulman interviewed Midwestern college students in attending their first-year and who were living in university housing (Grayson & Shulman, 2000, p. 19). The students, ranging in age from 17 to 19, included 21 females and 12 males (Grayson & Shulman, 2000, p. 19). Participants were asked to identify special objects and describe each of them in terms of acquisition and meaning (Grayson & Shulman, 2000, p. 19). As a means of identifying irreplaceability, researchers asked participants if the meaning associated with the object would be different if an exact replica replaced it, and why they would or would not accept a substitute (Grayson & Shulman, 2000, p. 19).

The content of the 30 respondents’ answers were analyzed for a total of 168 objects, including indexing and replicability of the object (Grayson & Shulman, 2000, p. 19). Additionally, qualitative analysis was performed on the descriptors of the objects and replicability of them (Grayson & Shulman, 2000, p. 20). Researchers found that objects respondents considered replaceable were associated with general themes, including periods of time or places, not specifically tied to an event or person (Grayson & Shulman, 2000, p. 20).
Conversely, objects which were associated with a specific meaningful person or event, or even more significant connection between a specific person and an event, were considered irreplaceable (Grayson & Shulman, 2000, p. 20). Gifts received by a valued gift-giver were examples of irreplaceable objects (Grayson & Shulman, 2000, p. 20).

Those items that reminded (considered a “semiotic process”) the respondent of the past signify experiences and relationships connected to pleasant or important memories (Grayson & Shulman, 2000, p. 20). Although substitutes for replaceable objects could bring back the same memories as the original, it was not the object that was important, but the memory tied to it (Grayson & Shulman, 2000, pp. 20-21). In contrast, irreplaceable objects represented tangible evidence of the important moment or memory, where a replaceable object may not (Grayson & Shulman, 2000, p. 21). Retaining objects from events or places that were actually experienced by respondents linked the person to the past as a formulation of identity (Grayson & Shulman, 2000, p. 21). One participant said that to lose an irreplaceable object would be likened to losing something connected to themselves (Grayson & Shulman, 2000, p. 21).

It is interesting to note that Grayson and Shulman took notice of those items respondents categorized as replaceable. Young males (adolescents) said they considered stereos, photos, and computers replaceable, where late-middle-age males said that trophies, televisions, and musical instruments were replaceable (Grayson & Shulman, 2000, p. 27). Adolescent females responded most frequently that photos, computers, televisions, and clocks were replaceable, in contrast to late-middle-age females who said that recorded music, photos, cameras, jewelry, vehicles, and musical instruments were replaceable (Grayson & Shulman, 2000, p. 27). Grayson and Shulman noted (2000) that 85 percent or more of the personal items respondents described in the study are mass produced, but participants still anchored their self-identity to these objects in contrast to
one-of-a-kind originals (Grayson & Shulman, 2000, p. 28). Still, those items considered irreplaceable were associated with a semiotic representation of the respondent’s identity (Grayson & Shulman, 2000, p. 28).

**Thinking about Happiness.** Bryant, Smart and King delved further into the connection between reminiscing and emotional experiences (2005). They begin by asking if reminiscing is positively correlated with the ability to enjoy one’s life, and compared the results of younger adults to older adults (Bryant, Smart, & King, 2005, p. 230). A sample of 106 females and 74 male students from the Midwest (average age of roughly 20) were asked to respond to an anonymous questionnaire to gain insight into positive experiences in relation to their capacity of enjoying life (Bryant, Smart, & King, 2005, p. 234).

The results of the study concluded that as much as 50% of respondents associated the reminiscence of positive memories with personal relationships, subsequently determining that positively reminiscing serves as a stress-reducing coping strategy for college-age adults (Bryant, Smart, & King, 2005, p. 235). More respondents (approximately 62%) reminisced about events occurring within a span of 5 years, versus only 16% who said their experiences occurred beyond 5 years (Bryant, Smart, & King, 2005, p. 235). The antecedents that were most common when respondents reported happy memories were when they were either “alone (20%),” “feeling down (17%),” or “when both alone and feeling down (19%)” (Bryant, Smart, & King, 2005, p. 235).

Additionally, respondents said that they connected “(1) new perspective and self-insight toward present problems (29%); (2) positive affect (19%); and (2) escape from the present (18%)” as the primary outcomes of positive reminiscing (Bryant, Smart, & King, 2005, p. 235). Only 2% of students said that positive reminiscence had no effect (Bryant, Smart, & King, 2005, p. 235). Not surprisingly, the more that college-age respondents said they had positive
reminiscing experiences, they also reported that their lives were more enjoyable (Bryant, Smart, & King, 2005, p. 236). These results are in alignment with the previous research conducted on older adults (Bryant, Smart, & King, 2005, p. 235). The most impactful limitation on the study is the assignment of cause-and-effect variables that are looked at in one way to correlate outcomes which could way the results (Bryant, Smart, & King, 2005, p. 239).

**Happiness from Material Objects.** How is happiness connected to material objects? Phenice and Griffore (2013) studied the role that memories of objects have on older adults. More specifically, objects that a person has collected over the span of their life are meaningful in that they provide a reminder of life events and memories that the owner self-identifies with (Phenice & Griffore, 2013, p. 742). Often, the experience connected to the object is a pleasant one for which the owner finds comfort in remembering (Phenice & Griffore, 2013, p. 742). More, it is the meaning assigned to the memories associated with the object that most influences one’s personal identity (Phenice & Griffore, 2013, p. 742).

According to Phenice and Griffore (2013), possessions are symbolic of relationships of the past (p. 742). Objects could be representative of a personal success or be a reminder of a feeling one once had (Phenice & Griffore, 2013, p. 742). It is because of a longing for connection to friends or family that the person places higher meaning on the object. In fact, one study found a significant correlation between one’s esteemed objects and mood (Phenice & Griffore, 2013, p. 742).

This study was comprised of “ethnographic interviews” as the means of obtaining information regarding older adults living in long-term care home (Phenice & Griffore, 2013, p. 743). Two researchers, one male and one female, listened and recorded data while interviewing
eleven consenting participants (Phenice & Griffore, 2013, p. 743). Sessions were held at the care facility where the participant lived (Phenice & Griffore, 2013, p. 743). Participants were encouraged to talk about their important life events and the significant connection the events had with the object (Phenice & Griffore, 2013, p. 743). In addition, participants were asked to provide information about their age, time at the care facility, how they felt about past events, how they felt about their current living situation, and the objects themselves (Phenice & Griffore, 2013, p. 743). They were also asked to share the feeling they associated with the objects, remembering events connected to the objects, and how they felt about the event or memory (Phenice & Griffore, 2013, p. 743).

Quantitative data consisted of “number of years in the residential facility, respondent’s satisfaction with the residential facility, and how respondents felt on the day of the interview” (Phenice & Griffore, 2013, p. 743). Of eight females and three males, ages 80-98, two had lived in the home for less than one year, while another participant had lived there for 18 years (Phenice & Griffore, 2013, pp. 744-745).

Qualitative data was gathered through recording the narrative and determining themes where it is based in grounded theory (Phenice & Griffore, 2013, p. 743). Participants were asked to rate their personal satisfaction on a 1 to 10 scale, where 10 was extremely positive (Phenice & Griffore, 2013, p. 745). All but one participant indicated that they felt mostly very positive (score of 8 or more), and reporting feeling well on interview day (Phenice & Griffore, 2013, p. 745).

One conclusion of the study was that the objects participants most valued were directly linked with an important person, event, or achievement in their life (Phenice & Griffore, 2013, p.
Researchers also found that arts and crafts created by special people in the participants’ lives were highly valued (Phenice & Griffore, 2013, p. 745). In short, “if an object has a meaning and a memory associated with it, it becomes an important object” (Phenice & Griffore, 2013, p. 745).

Interestingly, when asked about objects that were not currently in their possession, some respondents identified “spouses, friends, cars, children, grandchildren, books, and the ability to pursue a profession” (Phenice & Griffore, 2013, p. 746). Researchers said that residents must be able to have a connection to something meaningful as well as be able to describe the symbolism in terms of their own identity (Phenice & Griffore, 2013, p. 746). Connection, in turn, leads to positive feelings.

A darker arena of death and dying, and the coping mechanisms of the grieving person also have light to shed on the meaning of objects. “The loss of a loved one can engender a profound shift in our understanding of who we are,” in part because the griever must now reevaluate their relationship with the deceased and the bonds that were shared to make sense of the loss (Turley & O’Donahue, 2012, p. 1335). That a person will look for and attempt to connect with the places or objects that were associated with the deceased person tells much about the searching for meaning and experiencing of emotions that one works through in the process of grieving (Turley & O’Donahue, 2012, p. 1335.)

**Financially Significant Objects.** What about objects whose primary significance or purpose is monetary? Can happiness still be predicted? Okulicz-Kozaryn, Nash, and Tursi investigated the link between happiness and car ownership. The researchers specifically focused on two categories; luxury cars and frugal cars. Luxury cars are defined in their study as having a
beginning price point of $35,000 or greater, while frugal cars are all others below $35,000 (Okulicz-Kozaryn, Nash, & Tursi, 2015, p. 121). The researchers argue that owning a luxury car does not necessarily make the owner happier than frugal car owners (Okulicz-Kozaryn, Nash, & Tursi, 2015).

Research consisted of correlation analysis and observation (Okulicz-Kozaryn, Nash, & Tursi, 2015). While luxury and frugal cars are comparatively convenient, researchers postulated that luxury car owners tend to be less happy (Okulicz-Kozaryn, Nash, & Tursi, 2015). In short, money did not buy happiness.

Theories used to explain the reduced happiness in luxury car owners include adaption theory (a person wants more in addition to the “more” they already have), multiple discrepancy theory (comparing what one has to what everyone else has to determine one’s happiness), and the needs/livability theory (happiness occurs through needs fulfillment and “objective living conditions”) (Okulicz-Kozaryn, Nash, & Tursi, 2015, pp. 129-130). Data was obtained via questionnaire which asked participants to rate their overall level of happiness (range of not at all satisfied to very satisfied) (Okulicz-Kozaryn, Nash, & Tursi, 2015). Results indicated that “people with one car are no happier than people without a car, and less happy than people with more cars” where the happiest people have no more than 3 cars (Okulicz-Kozaryn, Nash, & Tursi, 2015, p. 132). Indeed, researchers concluded that their initial assumption, luxury car owners were not happier than if they had a frugal car, was correct (Okulicz-Kozaryn, Nash, & Tursi, 2015). Researchers explain this result by saying that “it is not the luxuries but wealth that contributes to happiness,” since wealthier people tend to own luxury cars (Okulicz-Kozaryn, Nash, & Tursi, 2015, p. 132). Moreover, luxury car owners, particularly middle class owners,
had to work more hours to earn enough to purchase a luxury car which results in a loss of personal time (Okulicz-Kozaryn, Nash, & Tursi, 2015, pp.134-135).

As an aside, the baseline U.S. median annual income obtained from the United States Census Bureau website (2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates) was $48,737 (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). According to Consumer Reports (2017), a new 2017 Toyota Camry costs about $24,000, while a 2017 Ford Expedition LE Limited 4x4 sells for roughly $63,000. The additional monthly payment for the difference in purchase price of approximately $39,000 at 3% interest over 60 months is $701 per month according to Bankrate (2017). Using $48,737 as a baseline pay rate working 40-hour weeks, a person would have to work an additional 30 hours a month to make the extra payment on the Expedition.

Beyond the limitations described in the study, such as obtaining qualitative data and attempting to make correlations based on socio-economic factors, the research paper itself is wordy and unorganized. Additionally, researchers use analogies to communicate means, methods, and results. Further research needs to be done on the topic to validate the repeatability of the study.

**Wanting What One Has.** Larsen and McKibban dig deeper into having and wanting versus having and not wanting (2008). They used probability theory as their basis for determining the predictability of wants and haves (Larsen & McKibban, 2008, p. 371). Their theory is that people have things and want things, and there is an area (for example a Venn Diagram) in which the thing they have is the thing they want (Larsen & McKibban, 2008, p. 371).
In order to test this theory, Larsen and McKibban took pilot data from 36 females and 14 males by asking each person to list all of the things they have versus want under one of “five categories: “material possessions,” “interpersonal relationships,” “abilities and/or traits,” “accomplishments and/or work,” and “other” (2008, p. 372).” Participants were allowed eight choices per category, and describe if each item was a feasible accomplishment at their current life stage (Larsen & McKibban, 2008, p. 372). Most material objects were defined as either vehicles, housing, appliances, electronics, clothing, or furniture (Larsen & McKibban, 2008, p. 372). Employment, education, and personal relationships were also listed among the “wants” (Larsen & McKibban, 2008, p. 372).

Once the data was collected and the categories narrowed down, the researchers asked 126 undergraduates (56 males and 70 females) to provide information on what they have (in the categories above on a scale of 1 to 8, 8 being “have a lot of”) and how much they actually want it (on a scale of 1 to 9, 9 being maximum desire) (Larsen & McKibban, 2008, p. 372). Additionally, participants were asked about their personal wellbeing and how thankful they felt administered by questionnaire (Larsen & McKibban, 2008, p. 372).

The results of this study indicated that “participants tended to be quite happy, to have slightly more than half the items in the Have/Want Survey, and to want the items listed on the survey to a fairly large degree” (Larsen & McKibban, 2008, p. 373). Most participants also “wanted what they had, and had what they wanted,” though the two are distinct (Larsen & McKibban, 2008, p. 373). Larsen and McKibban (2008) go on to say that “participants who wanted what they had more than others did tend to be happier” as did “those who had more of what they wanted” and “those who simply had more things” (p. 373). Interestingly, the number of things people had were not necessarily predictors of happiness (Larsen & McKibban, 2008, p.
Both having what you want and wanting what you have was the best predictor of happiness (Larsen & McKibban, 2008, p. 374).

**Giving as a Symbol of Happiness.** Dunn, Aknin, and Norton (2008) ask the question “can money buy happiness,” and then answer “no” (p. 1687). They say that once a person’s basic needs have been taken care of, income has not much more than a weak effect on a person’s happiness (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008, p. 1687). Among the reasons that people do not find long-term happiness is spending money on expensive items (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008, p. 1687). Dunn, Aknin, and Norton (2008) suggest rethinking the way people approach spending such that money becomes a symbol of the investment in positive social benefit for others rather than as a sign of wealth and purchase power (p. 1687).

These researchers asked 348 females and 284 males about their annual income, prosocial spending, and personal happiness (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008, p. 1687). Prosocial spending consisted of gifts for other people and charitable donations (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008, p. 1687). The regression study revealed that spending money on oneself did not impact a person’s happiness, but spending money on someone or something else did (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008, p. 1687). In fact, it took only $5 in spending on others, according to Dunn, Aknin, and Norton’s final study, to increase a person’s own happiness (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008, p. 1688).

**Happiness; the Ultimate Destination.** Even though happiness cannot truly be quantified, it can be instead qualified with terms like “the you-know-what-I-mean” feeling (Gilbert, 2005, p. 35). Since happiness is an experience, it can really only be described in terms of the events that come before the feeling (Gilbert, 2005, p. 36). The events and surrounding the circumstances are interpreted through one’s accumulation of socio-cultural competency, and
therefore described in relation to other experiences (Gilbert, 2005, p. 36). In actuality, experiencing happiness is partially remembering an event that occurred in the past and comparing it to the current encounter (Gilbert, 2005, p. 43). Even when the feelings evoked are unpleasant, finding an explanation for the event, attaching meaning to the event, somehow makes it a person feel better (Gilbert, 2005, p. 205).

Whether materialism or virtue is the decidedly paramount association one makes with happiness, there is inevitably a book or YouTube video available for further reference. With countless perspectives on the answer to what makes one happy, a person can select the philosophy that most closely meets their ideals, value system, and worldview of what happiness is. What matters is that life matters. Ultimately, meaning is what makes life matter (Smith, 2017).

Rationale

Nearly all of the literature presented above points to significant and meaningful objects as communicators of the owner’s attitudes, beliefs, and opinions about their world at large. Objects are indicators of what is important to people. What they have and why they have it can tell an observer about the things that make the owner happy. From reliving memories, to creating a certain ambiance, to having what one wants and wanting what they have, the existing literature is comprehensive.

Even as the literature sheds light on the various facets of materialism in conjunction with personal space, it does not entirely correlate meaning to happiness. The literature leaves short understanding more about how meaningful objects are and how happy something makes someone. This research contributes to answering the question of “how much?”
Research Questions

The previous pages have provided evidence of the connection of special meaning to personal objects. The studies presented have also provided a comparison between material possessions intended as a symbol of wealth and those items that provide reminders of past events and relationships. Additionally, it has been said that reliving the memories associated with some of those sacred artifacts evokes positive emotional response.

Yet, the following questions remain unanswered:

1. How meaningful is this item to you?
2. What does this item symbolize for you?
3. Who reminds you of this item?
4. How happy does this item make you?

This study will provide answers to the above questions and the possibility for predicting happiness.
CHAPTER 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is an investigation into the symbolism people identify with their personal items resulting from their navigating the culture and environment in which they live. Due to the potentially large volume of information to be collected and sorted through without placing sideboards on the study, the scope was limited to looking only at objects located in personal residences, and binding the respondent to reply to objects found within a single room. The number of “favorite objects” was limited to three because follow-on questions increased the volume of qualitative data to be categorized analyzed.

The primary intent of this study is to validate the positive correlation between meaning, happiness, and personal objects through first-person reporting. All data collected is qualitative in natures, so results of this study are primarily inferential. The outcome of this research is to be able to predict whether a person’s personal objects are indicators of that person’s happiness, using meaning and symbols as the connectors of symbolic interactions.

Methodology of the Study

**Qualitative Research:** This study is primarily focused on the qualitative research method that is concerned with “how humans use signs and symbols to create and infer meaning” through recording the responses in “linguistic (non-numeric) form” (Griffin, 2009, p. 20). It uses the survey method as a means of collecting self-reported data that is reflective of the thoughts and feelings of the respondents in relation to the topics being explored, in this case, meaning and happiness (Griffin, 2009, p. 21). The responses to questions are subjective to the respondents’ experiences, and cannot be quantified other than by the individual.
Of primary interest are the words used to describe the objects named as favorites, specifically the descriptors for symbolism and significance. Using textural analysis, the text responses are compared to the rating of how much meaning or happiness the objects hold for a person. In textural analysis, relationships between the text (words describing the objects) and the participant’s interpretations (ratings) give insight into the experiences that shape the participants’ view of social constructs (Rubin et al., 2009, p. 216).

Attempting to “describe or to explain people’s current attitudes, opinions, thoughts, and…reports of behavior surrounding an issue or event” using the survey method required creating questions to link the variables in the hypothesis (Rubin et al., 2009, pp. 218-219). Therefore, presenting questions related to the types of possessions a person has, where and how these objects are displayed, and knowing the meaning and happiness that person assigns to their personal items may help predict the existing or future happiness of others through the observation of trends that arise in the data (Rubin 2009).

Survey Participants

Population: This survey was open to both males and females ages 18 years or older who have access to the internet (access to the survey was by web link). This study was open for five weeks and was limited to 40 participants and one round of survey (also called an inquiry in Appendix A). All participation was voluntary, confidential, and via the internet so respondents can remain unknown. The intent of having participants remain anonymous is to increase the sense of security the respondent would have in sharing about their personal items, their relationships, and their feelings.

Informed Consent: All participants were informed prior to the beginning of the survey of the purpose of the study, and that continuing forward with and completing the survey implies
the participant’s consent. There were no additional consent forms to be filled out prior to taking the survey.

**Instrument**

**Survey:** This instrument is comprised of a series of 10 questions intended for use in correlating material possessions of the participant to meaning and, ultimately, happiness. Most questions ask the participant to evaluate qualities of the object they identified as having been important to them. Additional questions, such as “which room do you spend the most time in at home” and “what do you value most in any relationship,” are intended to anchor the research to the study of the home environment and personal relationships. Gender and age questions are intended to be used to discuss additional parallels that have been discovered as a result of the examination of data. The survey instrument, also called an inquiry, is shown in Appendix A.

**Data Gathering:** The survey instrument was prepared using an internet survey platform. The survey/inquiry web link address was sent to multiple Facebook Friends via messenger and then shared with others either on a page or through messaging, in part to share the link with a broader audience as well as to remove the researcher a level away from any respondents.

According to Facebook (2017), there were over 1,860,000,000 active Facebook users recorded during the month of December 2016, and roughly 85% of those users residing outside the United States and Canada. Thus, with the volume and variety of potential respondents through Facebook, respondents were based more on the willingness to respond rather than the seeking out of specific pools of potential participants.

In order to keep the amount of data collection and analysis to a manageable size, the survey was closed after 40 participants have completed survey. This study limits the number of
participants to 40 due to the extensive time required for time needed to administer and collect the surveys, and for data analysis.

The research focuses on upwards of 120 objects (a maximum of three objects per person) and the meaning the owners have assigned to those objects. The rationale for keeping this study focused on a limited pool of participants and objects is that there are five characteristics (category, symbol, level of meaning, association/relationship, and level of happiness) being used to evaluate each object. Thus, there are a minimum of 600 associations to assess for similarities and differences. Raw data retrieved from the internet survey platform was reduced and then processed for linkages to gender, location of primary occupancy, most reported objects and their ranking, and words most often used to describe meaningful and happiness-promoting objects.

Finally, the scope of this study is limited to the home environment, personal (as opposed to professional) relationships/events, and objects that the respondent maintains in their personal (private) space. It is assumed that a person’s more meaningful objects are located at their personal residence, and that a person is more likely to have special symbolic interactions with them there than elsewhere.

Data Analysis

**Data Processing:** The information gathered includes primarily text and numerical ratings. Data collected describes the number of objects of the same kind someone has displayed in their environment, the space the person spends the most time in, the number of times a word is associated with a type of object (and further divided into categories per characteristic defining questions), and the values the participant assigns to their state of happiness with respect to particular objects. Qualitative data reduction will be in the form of an assessment of the participants’ overall feelings as reported in the survey, with any significant deviations noted.
**Design:** Symbolic interactionism theory, which is interested in examining the relationship between communication and symbolism (Blumer, 1986), and the theory of semiotics (Barthes, 1964) provide the theoretical basis by which this study was devised. The design of this research is based on a compilation of Gosling, Ko, and Mannarelli’s (2002) investigation into the perception of someone based on the assessment of that person’s personal items and living space, the self-reporting quality of Phenice and Griffore’s (2013) work with older adults and the meaning of their possessions, and Larsen and McKibban’s (2008) categorization of meaningful objects and prediction of happiness. Finally, the principal Sensazione, specifically dealing with the human senses, furnishes the key piece that connects meaning to happiness: experience (Gelb, 2004). Thus, the happiness survey inquiry is fabricated to capture the characterization of the quality of experiences a person has had in relationship to the meaningful object, and to happiness itself.

**Assumptions:** Several assumptions arising from the review of the literature informed the design of the survey instrument. The first assumption is that people will say they value objects that evoke positive memories and strong feelings of happiness as evidenced by a high rating (7 or better). Secondly, objects reported as most valued are located in the room the participant says they spend the most time in. Finally, it is assumed that because the survey instrument is delivered in English the words people use to describe their values and object generally mean the same thing to the other respondents. For example, happiness means the same thing to all respondents as it is defined in Chapter 1.

**Analysis:** The analysis of the data includes organizing the responses into categories, averaging the reported levels of meaning and happiness for each category, and comparing the words used to describe the symbolism of the objects. The results were broken down into five
groups, two for males and three for females. A subcategory for the room where the most time is spent was created to compare objects and descriptions of meaning. Where able, related objects (such as computers and laptops) were pooled into one object category to compare what respondents most frequently said like objects symbolize.

The items that received a score of ten in meaning and happiness were separated from the rest of the objects and compared across the other categories and subcategories. Averages were taken as the sum of the values for a particular category or reference item divided by the total number of items.

**Ethical Considerations**

The research data generated for this study was collected from human subjects. Careful consideration was made to frame the research questions such that there was no controversial or sensitive information being requested of the respondent (Neuman, 2015, p.125). Also, the survey inquiry was designed to eliminate any potential feeling of discomfort or stress on the participant (Neuman, 2015, p. 125). A statement was provided at the introduction of the survey describing the reason for it and the application of the data being gathered. It was made clear that all participation was voluntary and anonymous, and that the potential respondent should close their browser window and exit the survey if they did not elect to continue on with it.

Additionally, the data has been filtered for any responses that could lead to identifying a respondent. Although no names were requested in the survey, respondents are aware that their answers may be used in the report out. Still, every effort has been made to remove any identifying information, such as a detailed account of a person’s object that others may recognize.
CHAPTER 4: THE STUDY

Introduction

This chapter covers the design of the study, the administration of the survey inquiry instrument, and the results of the analysis of the data collected from 40 respondents. Sections focus on responses from females, males, and a comparison of both genders. Additionally, the evaluation of similarities and differences between responses for people who spent the most time in the same room category and for various items named is presented.

This survey was constructed and administered to answer the following research questions:

1. How meaningful is this item to you?
2. What does this item symbolize for you?
3. Who reminds you of this item?
4. How happy does this item make you?

The Survey. This survey was comprised of ten questions. The first question regarding the location of the room the respondent spends the most time in gives insight into their tendency towards privacy or for socializing. The next three questions were used to construct the semiology of the object, its primary use or category, and the meaning (on a scale of one to ten, ten being the most meaningful) attributed to it. Questions number five (how meaningful) and six (relationships) link the favorite possession with what the object meant to the respondent and who the respondent associates with that object. Question seven asked how happy the object makes the respondent (on a scale of one to ten, ten being the happiest/satisfied). Question number eight asked what the respondent values most in their relationships as a check on the previous answers. Question nine and ten were intended to gain insight into demographics.
A total of 40 participants responded over a 5-week time period. Most respondents answered the survey within a few days of being presented with the web link. The web link was pushed out during week one and again during week four.

Results of the Study

**Overview.** Both males and females ages 18 to 74 responded to the survey inquiry. The breakdown of respondents includes the following: 13 for ages 18-24, 3 for ages 25-34, 14 for ages 35-44, 4 for ages 45-54, 5 for ages 55-64, and 1 for ages 65-74. There were no respondents ages 75 or older.

For the purposes of data reduction, two main categories (males and females) were created, each with subcategories stemming from the responses to where the respondent spends the most time. Respondents said they spent the most time in the living room, bedroom, kitchen, bonus room, and study. These rooms were subcategorized as “living room,” “bedroom,” and “other” (other includes kitchen, study, and bonus room). The next several pages include sections on female respondents’ answers, male respondents’ answers, a comparison between the two genders, and a review of objects that scored 10 out of 10 on the meaning and happiness scales. The research questions set forth to guide the study are answered under the Findings section.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that happiness (how happy an object makes a person) can be predicted if it is known that an object holds special meaning. At the same time, happiness was not dependent on meaning and special memories. Happiness could be influenced by both an internal longing for connection and meaning, and a desire for feeling pleasure. Respondents from the study identified both themselves and close personal relationships as being meaningful.
Those respondents who said that they spent the most amount time in the bedroom and listed the bed as [one of their] their favorite object[s] said it was because they connect the bed to rest, sleep, relaxation, and comfort. As previously stated, Hayter also found respondents used these words to describe their bedrooms (1981, p. 80). When looking at the ratings for meaning (7.0 for males and 8.2 for females) as compared to happiness (9.5 for male and 9.0 for females), the bed as a symbol of rest and relaxation was less meaningful than their placement of happiness on the object. Both the self and the family were important to both genders in terms of creating meaning and happiness. Interestingly, only females reported spending the most time in a room other than the living room or bedroom.

Respondents who reported spending the most time in the living room listed the television as [one of their] their favorite object[s]. Both males and females indicated that the television represents escape and shared experiences with friends, family, and roommates. Additionally, females said the television also symbolized entertainment and bringing people together. When looking at the ratings for meaning (6.0 for males and 5.5 for females) as compared to happiness (9.0 for males and 6.6 for females), the television as a symbol of entertainment and shared experience was less meaningful than their placement of happiness on the object. However, the happiness of males was more impacted by the television than was for females.

Computers/laptops were also a more frequently reported favorite object that was said to symbolize connection (most often by females), information and entertainment. While computers/laptops held a meaning rating of 6.0 for males and 6.8 for females, these objects were more influential on the happiness of respondents (9.0 for males and 8.6 for females). This is an indication that connectedness makes people happy. Beyond connectedness, honesty, love, and shared interests also inspire happiness.
Items rated a 10.0 in either meaning or happiness support the hypothesis of this thesis: A person’s happiness can be determined by observing the types of possessions a person has, where and how these objects are displayed, and knowing the meaning that person assigns to their personal items, regardless of monetary value.

**Females.** A total of 33 females responded to the survey inquiry. Three sub-groups were created according to room; bedroom (11), living room (17), and other (5). The females identified 99 objects that were considered the favorites within these rooms.

Females in the bedroom group most frequently identified a bed (5 respondents), a laptop/computer (5 respondents) as their most favorite possessions within this room. Other objects identified as important included art, toys, cards, letters, books, photos, music, and bedding as some favorite possessions. Beds rated an 8.2 for meaning and a 9.0 for happiness, and were most described as symbolizing rest, comfort, relaxation. Laptops/computers rated a 6.8 for meaning and an 8.6 for happiness, and were most described as symbolizing connection and information. The relationships that most reminded respondents of the bed and laptop/computer were parents and self. Five of the respondents said they were 18-24, where the remaining reported being over 35. Every respondent in the 18-24 age range named their parents as the relationship that most reminded them of their favorite possessions.

Females in the living room group most frequently identified a television (8 respondents), a couch (7 respondents), and pictures (5 respondents) as their most favorite possessions within this room. Females in the living room group also identified pictures, quilts, lamps, chairs, books, clocks, art, and heirlooms among their favorite possessions. Televisions rated a 5.5 for meaning and a 6.6 for happiness, and were most described as symbolizing entertainment, relaxation, and shared experiences. Couches rated a 3.3 for meaning and a 7.1 for happiness, and were most
described as symbolizing comfort, stability, relaxation, and family. Pictures rated a 9.6 for meaning and a 9.4 for happiness, and were most described as symbolizing family, relationships, love, and memories. The living room group most reported parents, husbands, roommates, children, and other family members as the relationships that most reminded the respondent of their reported favorite objects.

Females in the “other” group most frequently identified a painting (2 respondents), a refrigerator (2 respondents), and a coffee maker (2 respondents) as their most favorite possessions within this room. Females in the “other” group also identified a sewing machine, kitchen appliances, a television, and a couch among their favorite possessions. Paintings rated an 8.0 for meaning and a 9.0 for happiness, and were most described as symbolizing memories. Refrigerator rated a 6.5 for meaning and an 8.5 for happiness, and were most described as symbolizing memories of family. Coffee maker rated 5.5 for meaning and a 9.0 for happiness, and were most described as symbolizing family, energy, adventure, and happiness. The painting and refrigerator category most reminded respondents of immediate family, such as a husband, mother, or sister, where the coffee maker reminded respondents of a husband and a landlord.

When asked what female respondents valued most in any relationship, the most common response was honesty (10), followed by love (8). Additional values reported were loyalty, compassion, support, quality time/togetherness, fun, connection, and communication.

Overall, females in the bedroom group rated their first favorite possession at 8.6 for meaning and 9.1 for happiness, 7.4 and 8.5 for their second favorite possession, and 6.5 and 8.3 for their third favorite possession. Females in the living room group rated their first favorite possession at 6.6 for meaning and 7.9 for happiness, 6.5 and 7.9 for their second favorite possession, and 6.2 and 7.7 for their third. The “other” group rated their first favorite possession
at 8.2 for meaning and 9.6 for happiness, 6.6 and 8.8 for their second favorite object, and 5.0 and 7.8 for their third favorite object.

**Males.** A total of 7 males responded to the survey inquiry. Two sub-groups were created according to room; bedroom (4) and living room (3). Males identified 21 objects that were considered the favorites in these rooms.

Males in the bedroom group most frequently identified a bed (4 respondents) as their most favorite possessions within this room. Other objects identified as important included bedding, computers, games, and a mirror as some favorite possessions. Beds rated a 7.0 for meaning and a 9.5 for happiness, and were most described as symbolizing rest, sleep, and memories. The relationships that most reminded respondents of the bed were family and self.

Males in the living room group most frequently identified a television (3 respondents) and a computer (2) as their most favorite possessions within this room. Other objects identified as important included pictures, a couch, a chair, and a stereo. Televisions rated a 6.0 for meaning and a 9.0 for happiness, and were most described as symbolizing escape. The relationships that most reminded respondents of the television were friends, family, and self. The computer rated a 6.5 for meaning and a 10.0 for happiness, and was most described as symbolizing entertainment and family memories. The relationships that most reminded respondents of the computer were self and children.

When asked what male respondents valued most in any relationship, the most common response was honesty (2), followed by shared interests (2). Additional values reported were friendship, support, humor, and adventure.

Overall, males in the bedroom group rated their first favorite possession at 6.8 for meaning and 8.6 for happiness, 6.0 and 8.0 for their second favorite possession, and 7.3 and 10.0
for their third favorite possession. Males in the living room group rated their first favorite possession at 6.3 for meaning and 9.0 for happiness, 6.3 and 9.3 for their second favorite possession, and 6.3 and 9.0 for their third.

**Gender Comparisons.** Females in the bedroom group reported their favorite possession (bed) as having more meaning than males reported (8.2 for females, 7.0 for males). However, males in the bedroom group reported that their possessions made them happier as compared to females (9.0 for females, 9.5 for males). Males in the living room group reported their most frequently identified favorite possession (television) for meaning as 6.0, where females rated the television as 5.5. Yet, the television made males over 2 points happier than females (9.0 as compared to 6.6 for females). Regarding values, both the males and female groups said honesty, shared experiences/quality time, and support were important to them. Communication, connection, love, and loyalty were also reported as being regarded.

The ratings for all 40 participants were summed, the high and low outlier was deleted, and the total was averaged by the remaining number of items. The overall average meaning reported for first favorite objects was 7.4, 6.7 for the second favorite, and 6.2 for the third object. The overall average happiness reported was 8.7, 8.4 for the second favorite, and 8.4 for the third object. Due to the overwhelming variety of favorite possessions named, and that the majority of object reported have already been described above, they will not be summarized here. Those items that most impacted to overall average are described in the next paragraphs.

**Perfect Ten.** Many important possessions were only described by one respondent. In several cases, these singularly reported items scored either a 10 for meaning or a 10 for happiness. Tables 1 and 2 show the number of times a respondent rated their object as “most meaningful” (a score of 10). Memorabilia, such as pictures, special dolls, personal journals and
letters, and one-of-a-kind items, were most often reported by females as being the most meaningful. Words females used when associating objects to meaning were love, memories, and relationships. Functional items, such as a bed, television, and computer, were deemed most meaningful by males. Males most often associated memories with their most meaningful items.

Table 1. The Number of Times an Item Was Rated a 10 for Meaning, Females

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ITEM</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>SYMBOLISM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Herb Cabinet</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Keeps Grounded, Healing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doll</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Children, Love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Inner Life, Creativity, Joy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Memories, Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pictures of Family</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Memories, Relationships, Love, Marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Comfort, Rest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cat</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clock</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Memory of Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flag Box</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Memory of Grandfather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Desk</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Childhood Memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lounge Chair</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Memory of Husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Platter</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Family Memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painting</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Memories of Sister/Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sewing Machine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Individuality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. The Number of Times an Item Was Rated a 10 for Meaning, Males

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ITEM</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>SYMBOLISM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Memories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couch</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Gather with Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Watch Movies, Ancestry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Memories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereo</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Memories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tables 3 and 4 show the number of times a respondent rated their object as “most happy” (a score of 10). Again, memorabilia, such as pictures, special dolls, personal journals and letters, and one-of-a-kind items, were most often reported by females as making them the happiest. Self-related items, such as beds, appliances, living room furniture, and utility items also rated a 10. Words females used when associating objects to happiness were love, memories, and relationships. However, females also included entertainment, creativity, pleasure, family time, rest, and relaxation.
Table 3. The Number of Times an Item Was Rated a 10 for Happiness, Females

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ITEM</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>SYMBOLISM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doll</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Children, Love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bed</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>First Purchase on Own, Comfort, Relaxation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Memories, Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Connection, Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cat</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Entertainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Entertainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Pleasure, Hobby, Escape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music Box</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couch</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Comfort, Cozy, Family Movie Night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffee Table</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sewing Machine</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Creativity, Ingenuity, Individuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quilt</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Snuggling with Family, Cozy, Family Movie Night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pictures of Family</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Memories, Relationships, Love, Marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clock</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Memory of Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flag Box</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Memory of Grandfather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plants</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Desk</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Childhood Memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lounge Chair</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Memory of Husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffee Maker</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Energy, Happiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refrigerator</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Nourishment, Family Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painting</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Memories of Sister/Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ironing Board</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Precision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutting Table</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Creativity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By contrast, males again reported functional items (bed, couch, television, computer, mirror, stereo) as bringing them the most happiness. The only two items scoring a 10 in happiness that were reported to hold special meaning were pictures and a patio umbrella.
Table 4. The Number of Times an Item Was Rated a 10 for Happiness, Males

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ITEM</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>SYMBOLISM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bed</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Memories, Sleep, First Bed on Own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couch</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Gather with Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Watch Movies, Ancestry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pictures</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Memories with Friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Entertainment, Family Memories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mirror</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patio Umbrella</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereo</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Memories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again, the only time the word “happiness” was reported as a symbol for the item that scored a 10 in happiness was a coffee maker.

**Findings:** This section is comprised of four parts. Each part provides answers to the research questions outlined in the introduction of this chapter. The answers to the questions below have been distilled from the evaluation of the data, and from the results above.

**How meaningful is this item to you?** The type of one’s personal items only appeared to affect the meaning associated with the objects. For example, televisions, beds, appliances, and other functional items were not considered particularly meaningful in relation to items that were said to have special memories associated with them. Special memories included the death or birth of a loved one, an exceptional event, or photographic reminders of their special relationships. Special objects scored higher than ordinary items. It wasn’t surprising that family, friends, and other relationships have an impact on the meaning and happiness one associates with their favorite object. Symbolic interactionism theory and semiology are both active contributors to the spaces people occupy and what they consider to have value, meaning, and ultimately influence happiness.
What does this item symbolize for you? Like Gosling’s 2002 study, items that are easily identified as functional tend to have shared cultural meaning. Those items that are unique because they hold special memories are harder to recognize because meaning is not the same as a label or category. In order to isolate a favorite object, it would be far easier to ask the owner what their favorite is and what meaning it holds for them. Happiness might then be inferred by how the owner describes their favorite object, and how unique it is. Fundamentally, a respondent’s personal interaction creating a symbolic attachment to a favorite item brought meaning to the items that, and in turn, made them the happiest.

Who reminds you of this item? Most all females in the bedroom group and “other” group reported that their favorite objects most reminded them of family members, while females in the living room group also added themselves to the list of persons who most reminded them of the object. Males, like the female respondents, reported family and self as the people who most reminded them of the object.

How happy does this item make you? The assumption that people will say they value objects that evoke positive memories and strong feelings of happiness as evidenced by a high rating (7 or better) was substantiated. However, it was anticipated that meaning would be rated higher than was reported for many of these objects. It is unknown without doing further research whether objects reported as most valued are located in the room the participant says they spend the most time in. In general, however, people who identified a favorite object did associate happiness with it. The higher the object was rated as being meaningful, the happier it made the owner.
Discussion

The structure for this research includes philosophy, theory, and foundation in terms of previous work. The philosophical perspective covers the premise of personal objects as a reflection of personal identity. The theoretical basis includes the connection of semiology to symbolic interactionism. Finally, previous work provides insight and additional study from multiple perspectives, and offers a closer look at some of the many influences on meaning and happiness.

**Philosophy:** The basic philosophy of this thesis is anchored in the concept of one’s being tied to what they surround themselves with. What a person has is a representation of what they value in life, what is meaningful to them, and consequently, a direct reflection of what makes them happy. These items, and those that are missing, are a physical manifestation and representation of all that makes up one’s physical and emotional life. Special material objects are reminders of important milestones in a person’s life, a reminder of special events, and showcase pieces that serve as symbol of personal identity and inner psychology. These meaningful objects are the sum of their happiness.

**Theoretical Basis:** The theoretical basis framing this thesis comes from semiology and symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism theory says that interactions between people, or people and objects, create meaning, and the manner of the responses to others or objects communicate meaning (Blumer, 1986). Semiology theory says that the mental image, in the form of meaning, a person has of an object may not necessarily match the actual object (Barthes, 1964, pp. 45-46). This thesis tied the theories of semiology and symbolic interactionism together to explain the material possession people have and why they have them. Further, the research
illustrates the connection people make with important memories and relationships to meaning and happiness.

**Previous Work.** This thesis confirms the work done to connect social interactions to a person’s beliefs and attitudes, and to what is important in their lives (Mick, 1986, p. 206). It supports the notion that cultural constructs occurring through rituals and social exchanges affect the meaning of classifications such as gender, age, class, to name a few (McCracken, 1986, p. 72). Objects, then, symbolize cultural values and beliefs where the symbolism can only be understood by mutual recognition within the group or culture (McCracken, 1986, p. 73).

This thesis supports findings that people acquire objects as tools to communicate about their own likes and dislikes, what they identify with, and where they fit in the socio-economic structure of the world (Davidson, 2009, pp. 759-760). People use objects to tell about their personal experiences and quality of life (Davidson, 2009, p. 760). They make choices about colors, shapes, and sizes of books, pictures, memorabilia, and functional objects that give insight into their self-identification and participation in the larger cultural identification (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002, p. 380).

Additionally, the results of this research mirror Gosling’s study of personal spaces and where and how objects are placed in relation to a person’s preferences for public or private spaces (2009, pp. 18-19). The respondents of the study indicated that they do use objects to evoke memories or emotions, confirming the concept of “feeling regulators” (Gosling, 2009, p. 21). The results also parallel Bryant, Smart, and King’s findings about the connection of happy memories to wanting to evoke the feeling of happiness when one is looking for a connection to their loved ones or the past (2005, p. 235), and Phenice and Griffore’s study concluding the most
valued objects one had were directly linked with an important person, event, or achievement in their life (Phenice & Griffore, 2013, p. 745). Also, in line with the research, the monetary value of an object did not necessarily influence a person’s happiness (Okulicz-Kozaryn, Nash, & Tursi, 2015).

Taken as a whole, this research supports the discoveries found in the literature reviewed. While meaning was not as easily correlated with the objects that were reported as favorites within the room the respondent spends the most time in, people reported that most of their objects were more apt to make them happy than to have special meaning. Those objects that were reported as having the most meaning were described as being meaningful because of a particular memory or attachment to the item that evoked a positive emotional response. The direct correlation between one’s favorite personal items and how happy those items make them was the most significant substantiation of earlier work.
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

Limitations of the Study

The primary limitation of this study is the “blind” web-based data gathering tool used. The survey web link was shared on social media extending beyond the primary researcher as the intent was to reach a broad audience. However, participants were able to log on to the survey website and complete the survey anonymously. Therefore, the researcher cannot follow up with specific participants to obtain additional information (as recommended in the Further Study section). At the same time, a second survey link for participant feedback was imbedded in the introductory paragraph for participants who wanted to provide additional comments. No respondents replied to the participant feedback link.

One additional limitation was the number of male respondents in relation to the number of females. Though the reports of favorite objects and symbols were fairly consistent, having additional male input would improve the understanding of the differences between how males and females view happiness and meaning. Also, ethnicity and physical locality were not included as research questions, but could be valuable in comparing geographic and ethnic differences in how meaning and happiness are perceived.

Recommendations for Further Study

The results of the study indicate that there is a relationship between one’s personal items, what meaning they have for that person, and the level of happiness they associate with the objects. While data was collected for objects specific to the room the respondent spends the most time in, information was not gathered for one’s single-most favorite/important possession. Neither was it collected for the respondents’ favorite space to spend time in.
One may be able to indirectly infer from the data which possession makes a respondent the happiest. However, the survey inquiry questions were framed to gather information about a favorite object in the room where the person spends the most time. Further study inquiry should be done to determine which object is a person’s favorite overall object, no matter where it is located. It would also be of benefit to know where the respondent’s favorite place to spend time is. Blumer (1986) suggested that one approach to studying cause and effect would be to note variability in the content of the communication, note the variables in the responsiveness to the communication as caused by an intervening event or experience, and note the interdependent link to the various interactions (pp. 184-185). The additional information paired with Blumer’s approach would be able to lend additional insight into the broader everyday lives of the participants, and improve analysis of non-verbal communication.

Additionally, the question of replicability for individual objects was not asked. It is recommended that the question of replicability be added to the survey inquiry along with the person’s favorite overall object and its rankings of meaning, happiness, and replicability. Moreover, does the respondent want what they have and have what they want to make them happy (Larsen & McKibban, 2008, p. 374).

Other things to consider would be integrating questions about the perceived financial value of favorite objects, proximity to urban areas (defined as 50,000 or more people), number of persons who occupy the same living space with the respondent, and type of housing they live in (United States Census Bureau, 2016). Analysis of the colors, shapes, sizes, quantity, and affinity for certain items should be included. Also, inquiring about the type of car the participant drives, the meaning and happiness ranking of it, and their annual income would add an additional layer of insight to the respondent’s broader, outer life and lifestyle. Finally, comparing the results of
the self-reports to observations made of the participant’s living space, such as Gosling’s team did, would give a robust dataset that should both validate this and the other studies referenced, as well as narrow the margin of error in predicting meaning and happiness.

Conclusions

This thesis provided an overview of literature reviewed on the topic of happiness, defined as a “balanced and positive connectedness perceived among various facets of the self,” and the results of independent research that connects one’s personal happiness to their objects (Delle Fave et al., 2016, p.19). Research found that ownership of material objects such as photos and meaningful memorabilia increased personal satisfaction and happiness in older adults. This study also found a correlation between the symbolism of special objects and increased happiness. The reasons why personal items remind people of the past were important in determining motivation. In a few words, the “why” is important in the pursuit of happiness. Relationships are a key factor in happiness. For others, happiness is a cup of coffee.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A: HAPPINESS STUDY INQUIRY QUESTIONS

The purpose of this inquiry is to better understand the connection between one's important possessions and how one feels about them. This inquiry is intended to inform graduate research in the area of communication and leadership, and is voluntary and confidential (no names will be requested). Please review and respond to the 10 questions. Some questions are open ended and others are scaled (0-10). Choose the answer that most closely represents your perspective.

STOP: By completing this survey, you are giving permission for the results to be collected and used towards academic research and publication. If you do not consent to be a participant, please do not read further and close your browser. If you choose to consent, please continue.

CONTINUE: This inquiry should take between 10 and 15 minutes. Please respond no later than March 20, 2017.

For additional questions or comments about this survey, you can fill out the follow-up questionnaire at Favorite Possessions Follow-up. [Web link]

Thank you very much for your time,

Angela Snyder

Graduate Candidate, School of Professional Studies

Gonzaga University

1. Which room do you spend the most time in at home?

2. Within this room, what is your favorite object? Second favorite object? Third favorite object?
a. First Favorite:

b. Second Favorite:

c. Third Favorite:

3. Which category best describes the objects in the order that you listed in Question 2?
   (example: clothing, photographs, diaries, books, toys, ornaments, weapons, jewelry, letters, certificates/awards, other.)

   a. First Favorite:

   b. Second Favorite:

   c. Third Favorite:

4. What does each object that you stated above symbolize for you? (Please describe a specific event, relationship, memory, etc. you associate with the object.)

   a. First Favorite:

   b. Second Favorite:

   c. Third Favorite

5. How would you rate how meaningful these objects are for you? (Rate on a scale from 0 to 10, 0 being not meaningful and 10 being very meaningful.)

   a. First Favorite:

   b. Second Favorite:

   c. Third Favorite

6. What is your relationship with the person who gave you or reminded you of each object?

   a. First Favorite:

   b. Second Favorite:

   c. Third Favorite
7. How would you rate how happy/satisfied/content this object makes you feel? (Rate on a scale from 0 to 10, 0 being not at all and 10 being very much.)
   a. First Favorite:
   b. Second Favorite:
   c. Third Favorite

8. What do you value most in any relationship (e.g. with family, friends, coworkers)?

9. Are you male or female?
   a. Male
   b. Female

10. What is your age?
    a. 18-24
    b. 25-34
    c. 35-44
    d. 45-54
    e. 55-64
    f. 65-74
    g. 75 or older