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The emotional value in objects: Insights from coping with the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

How possessions gain personal meaning has been a topic of interest to diverse fields studying the mind. Traditionally, the personal value of possessions is hypothesized to be driven by their special histories (Belk, 1988). We provide evidence that people value possessions for their ability to regulate distress. During the pandemic, people (N=333) reported having coping-possessions that helped them to regulate emotions (49%), solve problems (26%), or both (25%). Coping-possessions had high personal and monetary values (M=4.82 and 4.45, respectively; one-sample t-tests against midpoint, p s < .001) with problem-focused possessions having higher monetary values than emotion-focused ones (p < .001). The majority of coping-possessions, however, had mundane histories (e.g., bought at a store) rather than noteworthy ones (p < .001), suggesting that the emotional functions of objects contribute to their perceived personal value. This work also has implications for how adults use objects to regulate their emotions (Timpano & Port, 2021).