

Perceptions of Metaphysical Shops and Objects: A Closer Look At Making Value

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Introduction:

This project explored **metaphysical objects and shops** and how consumers of these objects have a unique value determinants that are based on personal connections, intimacy, and community, rather than price. Previous research has observed higher luxury items (Beverland, 2005), and found that authenticity was often left undefined in relevant scholarship. I aimed to help define authenticity through the lens of the consumer, as well as determine if, in this unique consumer space, authenticity determined value (Chhabra 2005). Due to the unique culture within metaphysical belief and value systems, I used previous research that dealt with themes such as aura, symbolic stories, consumer community, and morality as indicators of value (Brown et al. 2003). The use of college students as my sample, as well as the mode of consumption surrounding common and inexpensive objects, begins an exploratory discussion about the gap in previous literature.

Lets define Metaphysical!

According to the student's interviewed, some synonyms of metaphysical are **spiritual, magical, supernatural, religious**. Spiritual was the most popular synonym.

According to one student, **"It's anything I can use in my practice, which basically means any object. I use them [metaphysical objects] as representations of certain things or emotions. So it can be anything if you put meaning behind it"**.

Research Questions:

1. How do consumers of metaphysical objects define authenticity in the context of metaphysical objects/shops?
2. What attributes of a metaphysical object or vendor determine and contribute to the consumers understanding and perception of value?
3. How do consumers decide on what they procure, and where they get their products from?

SO WHAT?

This study tells us that the exchange of metaphysical objects lies somewhere between or outside of the realm of market-based exchange. Price is not a determination of value, but instead authenticity. Authenticity to consumers of metaphysical goods is tied to honesty and ephemeral qualities such as perceived intimacy with an object. Community relationships, such as with vendors or shop owners, is another huge influence. There is a rejection of the consumer/producer relationship we see in capitalism, and a cultivation of close personal relationships within the communities. These relationships are another influencer of value.

Sample Groups:

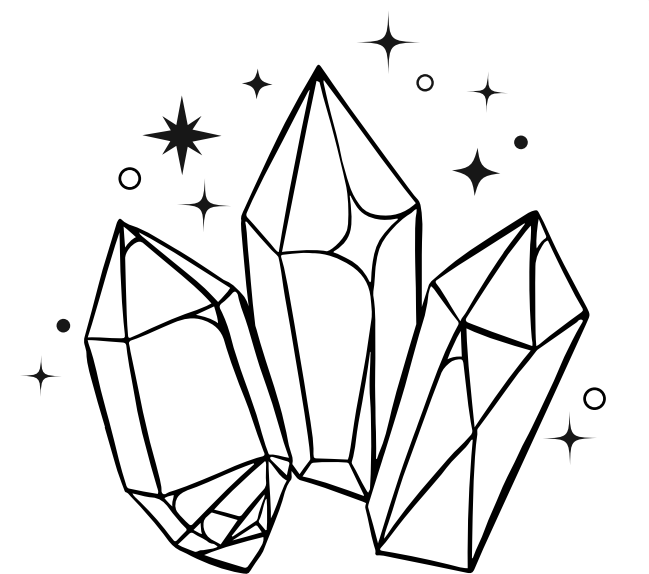
I interviewed **7 people in total**, each interview being 30 minutes. **5 were students** that considered themselves users and consumers of metaphysical objects and stores. The other **2 participants were local metaphysical shop owners** who were able to give detailed context of how they source and advertise their materials. Due to the uniqueness and locality of the project, I would consider this an **exploratory approach** that opened up avenues of further research within and around the metaphysical consumer space.

Findings:

- **Rather than understanding authenticity just as transparency of the origin of an object, consumers of metaphysical objects understand authenticity as being closely tied to ethical sourcing as well. However, to my surprise, many participants did not feel as though all authentic metaphysical items were ethically sourced, which leads me to believe that authenticity is based more in the material of the object rather than it's journey to the market. Ethical sourcing was still a notable determinant of value.**
- **The attributes of a metaphysical object or vendor that determined authenticity aligned with previous literature (Brown et al. 2003) in that they value aura, intangible connection, symbolic meaning, community morals, and morality (ethical sourcing), rather than indicators like price.**
- **Consumers choose metaphysical objects and locations based on transparency, intimacy with the owners/objects, sourcing, morality, and location.**

Quote by student on authenticity.

"I try and make sure to know where they are sourcing their crystals and other objects. I stopped working there [a metaphysical shop] when they began ordering from less-than-stellar places. I really try and make sure that things are ethically sourced. Someone can't be super spiritual and not care about the morality of the items that they buy/use."



Analysis:

Beverland (2005) critiques the use of the term "authenticity" in scholarly literature about material culture, arguing that it has not been clearly defined. Further, his research shows that meanings of authenticity are often unique and personal to the individual (Beverland 2005). In my research about metaphysical objects, consumers defined authenticity of metaphysical objects as the objects being "in their truest form" as well as having been ethically sourced. Authenticity is a key factor in value, rather than the price that the vendors sell the items for. Knowledge on the origin and acquirement of the products by the vendor increased the value further. An example of this was discourse around the herb white sage, which is a known Native American tool that many believe should be sourced directly from a Native American community that has explicitly granted their practice and materials to a seller. Locations that consumers chose to purchase their metaphysical items from were chosen based on the "aura" and comfortability of the place as well as the intimacy of the consumers' relationship with the vendors. An example of this was an overall preference for a local metaphysical shop that participated and contributed to community charity, as well as the owner of the shop encouraging close personal relationships between themselves and the customers. Ethical sourcing was one of the most notable determinants of value, but varied greatly depending on the person and their values. It could be seen as a determinant of authenticity, or it could be a completely separate yet important factor, meaning authenticity and ethical sourcing were not always interdependent. Consumer culture when it comes to metaphysical objects and vendors is unique due to how value is made. There is almost a rejection of capitalism among consumers, where the value does not relate to price value outside of what they may have bought the item for. Buying the object from a store seems to be an act that is done simply because capitalism demands it, rather than an acknowledgment of any price value. This can be seen as no consumer mentioned price as a determinant on whether or not they bought an item from one place over another.