

DOES AN ARTIFICIAL DIAMOND EQUATE ARTIFICIAL LOVE?: CONSUMERS' ATTITUDES

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ABSTRACT

The marketing of cubic zirconia engagement rings seems rather trivial compared to the grand theories of consumer behavior. And yet, cubic zirconia, moissanite, and other imitation diamonds have the potential to penetrate the \$4.8 billion diamond engagement ring market.

Not only has jewelry shown to be a culturally embedded product class, but engagement rings further the richness of this by adding the facet of rite of passage and the backdrop of sex roles.

This paper, the third in a research stream, explores consumers' attitudes of artificial diamond engagement rings. Are artificial diamonds a substitute for a luxury product or merely inferior?

INTRODUCTION

Why does it matter what are consumers' opinions of artificial diamond engagement rings? While this may sound like a peculiar marketing question, there are several implications for both theory and practice.

The diamond engagement ring market was \$4.8 billion in 2005 (Law 2006). While the average engagement ring is \$3200, what would be the impact of the popularity of \$100 rings? Are there ways for jewelers to exploit artificial diamonds in the market of the genuine ones?

Consumers' meanings for culturally embedded products are of particular interest to sociologists, psychologists, and consumer behaviorists (Solomon 1983). The development of cultural meanings of products is a narrative of the society itself (Belk 1988, Hirschman and LaBarbera 1990). Jewelry is a culturally-embedded product with several consumer meanings (first author, 2006). Both luxury goods and counterfeit goods have their own social histories (e.g. Penz and Stöttinger 2004).

This paper, the third in a research stream, explores consumers' attitudes of artificial diamond engagement rings. Are artificial diamonds a substitute for a luxury product or merely inferior? There is scant literature on attitudes toward counterfeit products and none on artificial diamonds.

Some history of both artificial diamonds and engagement rings is given. The combining of consumer behavior of the engagement ring purchase with that of artificial diamonds creates a whole new situation with almost no applicable literature. An exploratory study investigating attitudes towards artificial diamonds among young adults is presented. Implications for both theory and practice are highlighted. Finally, suggestions for future research are given.

ENGAGEMENT RINGS

In this paper, the term *diamond* denotes only genuine carbon stones. Any and all substitutes for diamonds, cubic zirconium, moissanite, etc., are referred to as *artificial*, *imitation*, or *fake*.

The betrothal ring began with the Romans as a plain iron hoop ring worn at home but exchanged for a gold ring in public. During the Middle Ages, most often, the precious stones of the day, sapphires and rubies were used in engagement rings.

In 1477, the future Emperor Maximilian gave the first recorded diamond engagement ring to Mary of Burgundy. A diamond was chosen as a symbol of longevity because of its resistance to fire and steel (GIA 2006) (and certainly not for its looks).

Diamonds were not popular until relatively recently. Unless properly cut, diamonds appear dark, dull, or even black when set. The rose cut, created in 1640 and commissioned by Cardinal Mazarin, was the first cut to give diamonds any life or sparkle. Its 12 sides and 16 facets could not rival the fire of the currently popular 56 (or the newer 100) facet cut. The 56 facet cut, perfected in the 18th century, was considerable progress over the rose cut and appreciated the proper geometry of the crystal to enhance brilliance.

De Beers is credited with a great deal of consumers' knowledge and attitudes towards diamonds as a result of decades of successful marketing campaigns. In response to the Depression, Ayer & Son, De Beers' ad agency, suggested an advertising and public relations campaign which would have a significant impact on the "social attitudes of the public at large" (Epstein 1982, p. 3).

A series of news stories and socialite photographs appeared in selected magazines and newspapers to reinforce the link between diamonds and romance. This strategy was used for decades and included Grace Kelly posing with her engagement ring. By 1941, the sale of diamonds had increased by 55% in the U.S. since 1938 (Epstein 1982).

In 1947, the long-running campaign, "A diamond is forever" began. In 1981, they augmented this with "How can you make two months' salary last forever?" These ads appear mainly in women's magazine setting expectation and relying on the bride-to-be's influence. De Beers' current budget is \$180 million to advertise cut diamonds, a product they did not even sell until very recently.

Today, 80% of brides receive an engagement ring, according to the Diamond Information Center and the center-stone diamond ring, with or without side stones, is the most popular. Other stones may include the bride's birthstone, other precious stones such as emeralds, sapphires or rubies, or an unusual stone such as pink tourmaline, pink sapphire, or aquamarine (Donahue 2006).

ARTIFICIAL STONES

Diamond "substitutes" crowd the market from glass set in base metal to better quality manmade simulated diamonds set in 14K gold to manmade diamonds. The most popular manmade diamond is moissanite, a lab-created diamond which is grown from a seed taken from a meteorite (hence their slogan: "Born from a Star" <http://www.-moissanite.com>). Moissanite is almost as hard as diamonds (9.25 on the Mohs scale as opposed to a 10 for diamonds) and has a higher refraction ("fire") but is never more colorless than a J rating (slight greenish tint). A moissanite ring costs a fraction of its natural diamond equivalent. A 2 carat moissanite set in 14K

gold tiffany setting retails for about \$1000 - \$1550 (<http://www.moissanitejewelry.com/shop>; <http://www.-moissanite-stardust.com> respectively). A 2 carat diamond (G color, SI₁ clarity, ideal cut) set in 14K gold tiffany setting retails for about \$12,000 – \$25,000 in 2011 (<http://www.bluenile.com>; www.cutratediamonds.com).

Reference groups are those to which one looks for guidance. Consumers belong to some reference groups but also compare themselves to groups or individuals with whom they do not interact but do serve as a reference (Kaiser 1998). The media can also provide reference group influence when sources are less accessible (Kaiser 1998).

Reference groups influence consumers' decision making (Moschis 1976). More interestingly, reference groups have greater influence when the product is publicly consumed and even more when the product is a publicly consumer luxury item (Bearden and Etzel 1982). In a study of real and imitation prestige handbags, Robinson and Doss (2011) found greater reference group influence for prestige items. Items in their study included "Celebrities always carry these handbags." and "I would buy this handbag if I saw many celebrities carrying it." The question arises of whether this applies to real and imitation diamonds. Most studies of imitation products have used fashion products which carry different social meaning than engagement rings which are symbols of commitment and a rite of passage.

What is the impact on the expectations of girls and women who see others of their reference groups wearing large diamonds even if the diamonds *are not real*? High quality cubic zirconia set in a 14K gold setting (retailing for about \$125) will give the wearer 10 years of sparkle before it clouds. Moissanite is very believable if the observer does not know to look for the double-facet refraction and the telltale greenish tint. It is entirely possible that women are led to believe that the actual number of women wearing 2+ carat rings is much more common than it actually is due to good quality fakes (first author, 2007).

Celebrity emulations, status seeking, and materialism all play their part in forming attitudes toward luxury products. The early twenty first century has seen more celebrity worship and denigration than ever before. Reese Witherspoon's Asscher cut diamond was credited with relaunching the shape (Elder 2006). Jennifer Lopez's 6.1 carat pink diamond started a trend of colored diamonds (Elder 2006). If the current trend among celebrities is multimillion dollar engagement rings, how simpler to emulate than with a relatively inexpensive fake?

Comparisons with one's peer social groups is a common influence on consumer behavior (Moschis 1976), especially of publicly worn items. This influence of the female on the purchase of an engagement ring is born out by research which credits two thirds (Howard 3004) to three quarters (Braverman 2005, Posnock 2006, Elder 2006), of brides-to-be with influencing the size, shape and setting of the stone.

A discussion of deception is in order. This is not a discussion of artificial diamonds used to deceive the purchaser or the recipient, at most only the "outside world". Buying an imitation is a way to get prestige without the price (Cordell et al 1996, Grossman and Shapiro 1988) and a couple may choose to forego the expense of a genuine diamond. How much the couple chooses to disclose the true composition of the ring to family and friends is their option.

CONSUMER BEHAVIOR, DIAMONDS, AND MATERIALISM

Vigneron and Johnson (1999) described three types of prestige-seeking consumer behavior all of which can apply to the purchase of an engagement ring. One form they termed "The Veblen Effect: Perceived Conspicuous Consumption" (Vigneron and Johnson 1999). Publicly consumed items are more likely to be conspicuously consumed than private ones but

also more susceptible to reference-group influence (as seen in Bearden and Etzel 1982). While price cues are often used as proxy for quality, or prestige, in the case of an engagement ring, the size of the diamond would be the cue. This would argue that prestige-seeking consumers would be likely to be attracted to artificial diamonds because they could afford a larger stone.

In their second form, “The Snob Effect: Perceived Unique Value”, Vigneron and Johnson (1999) discuss the appeal of a product that cannot be consumed by the masses. In this case, the high price and relative rarity of large diamonds would be appealing while artificial stones would be repellent.

In the third form, “The Band Wagon Effect: Perceived Social Value, consumers purchase products as symbols of group membership (Vigneron and Johnson 1999). This would suggest that this type of consumer would choose similar styles to his/her peers. These consumers may also choose the same brands or stores if they are shopping together.

While historians disagree on which century saw the birth of materialism, they all agree that a modern consumption-based orientation was thriving in the industrial and post-industrial ages (Belk 1984). Belk (1984, p. 291) defines materialism as:

The importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions. At the highest levels of materialism, such possessions assume a central place in a person's life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

Marketing has been accused of creating and exacerbating materialism but the question remains as to which comes first, the marketing of luxury goods or the desire to have them. Belk and Pollay (1985) found a rise in the number of luxury and pleasure appeals in U.S. magazine advertising over the past 80 years. They assert this shows at the least a reinforcement, as well as supporting an increase in, materialism by marketing.

One of the main traits of materialism is possessiveness. While some theories, such as those of Freud, argue that acquisitiveness and possessiveness are two different concepts, the first pre-purchase and the latter post-purchase, Belk (1984) was unable to differentiate these in scale development supporting a single combined concept.

An example of broadcast materialism is Lifetime network's TV reality show, *Bridezillas*, which takes a humorous, sometimes frightening, look at the over-the-top expectations of brides-to-be. These women plan their weddings (or implement the plans they made years before they met their grooms) while throwing tantrums and threatening anyone in their path with tears, curses, recriminations, and the occasional lawsuit. At the same time, more television shows (*Real Housewives of D. C.*; *Rich Housewives and Their Pampered Pets*) about people living lower upper class lives leaves the viewer with the impression that driving a Bentley, having a plastic surgeon on speed-dial, and sporting megacarats diamond rings is the norm.

As this is an exploratory study, it is premature to develop research hypotheses. Instead, the study focused on open ended questions to elicit consumer's opinion.

THE STUDY

The focus of this study was to begin the exploration of consumers' attitudes toward artificial diamonds, particularly when used in engagement rings. The design consisted of two surveys with both close and open ended questions administered to undergraduate and graduate students at a Northeastern college. The use of students as a convenience sample is appropriate as they are also the target market of engagement ring advertising and are likely to become engaged

in the near future. They are even more appropriate because few of them were engaged and even fewer married. This means that they will be among future potential consumers. Limitations of this sample are presented later.

Close ended questions elicited reactions to imitation diamonds used in engagement rings, included a materialism scale, and collected demographic data. Open ended questions asked about attitudes toward artificial diamond engagement rings. There were two surveys one for males and one for females. Females were asked how they would react to being given artificial diamond engagement ring and males were asked about their attitudes toward giving one.

The survey contained a materialism scale, adapted from Richins and Dawson (1992), to test for any relationship between attitudes and level of materialism. This resulted in a continuous measure.

The sample was drawn from a Northeastern college yielding 193 usable surveys. Students for the study were enrolled in either a psychology or a marketing class.

Ages ranged from 19 to 51, though 91% of the sample was between 19 and 22. The gender split was relatively even with males and females (84 males, 109 females). The majority, 96%, were not married or engaged making this sample more representative of potential shoppers of engagement rings.

The first question regarding attitudes toward artificial diamonds was a Likert style close ended question. The choices for “would you consider receiving/wearing an imitation diamond in an engagement ring?” were the result of scanning the jewelry trade literature for current trends (e.g. Bent 2007, Donahue, 2006). The results of this question were overwhelmingly negative and can be seen in Table 1.

TABLE 1
CLOSE ENDED RESPONSES TO “WOULD YOU CONSIDER RECEIVING/WEARING AN IMITATION DIAMOND IN AN ENGAGEMENT RING?”

Selection	Male	Female	Total
never, only a real diamond	73 (91%)	77 (73%)	150 (81%)
I'd consider a birthstone or less expensive stone like a tourmaline rather than an artificial diamond	3	11	14
I'd consider a moissanite but never a cubic zirconium	0	3	3
cubic zirconia set in real gold would be tolerable	0	2	2
An imitation diamond (such as cubic zirconia, white topaz or Diamonique®) would be fine with me.	4 (5%)	12 (11%)	16 (8%)
	80	105	185

An ANOVA tested for significant differences in choice based on materialism or age. These were not significant ($F_{4,165} = 1.009, p > .05$; $F_{4,153} = 1.681, p > .05$, respectively).

The responses to the open ended questions were content analyzed by two researchers independently to allow themes to emerge. The first question, “Please describe your feelings towards imitation diamonds” yielded 155 comments. The other two questions were specific to male and female surveys. For females, “how would you feel if your fiancé offered you an engagement ring with an artificial diamond?” and for males, “how would you feel if you offered your fiancé an engagement ring with an artificial diamond?” The reader is reminded that the surveys explicitly stated that there was no deception on the part of either party.

Seven categories emerged, not including “don’t know”, although the categories were not completely mutually exclusive. The categories were: *No Way No How*; *O.K.... for Someone Else* (a.k.a. *Maybe*); *O.K.*; *Fake Feeling or Commitment*; *Deception*; *Appearance of the Stone*; and “*I feel cheap*”. See Table 2 for frequencies by gender.

TABLE 2

	Female freq.	Male freq.	% of total comments
No Way No How	24	14	25%
O.K.... for Someone Else	14	13	18%
O.K.	21	14	23%
Fake Feeling or Commitment	6	11	11%
Deception	2	4	4%
Appearance of The Stone	9	2	7%
“I feel cheap”	6	6	8%
don't know	5	4	6%
	87	68	103%*
	56%	44%	

* Some comments fit more than one category.

The category titled “No Way No How” accounted for 25% of the written responses and 81% of the forced choice responses. It was also the most commonly chosen option in the close ended question. The comments in this category were also the most vehement, “Man up son! Don’t be cheap” (male, 21), “It’s just money, buy her a diamond!” (male, 21) and “Engagement rings do not need to be extremely costly, but a diamond is iconic of engagement. One time in your life that quality matters! Engagement ring lasts forever” (female, 23).

The next two categories are related but have different implications. There are differences between whether an artificial diamond is acceptable for oneself or someone else. “I don’t think it’s right. There’s just a certain tradition to these things. I can see why other couples use imitation diamonds, but it’s not for me” (male, 22). Although sometimes the sentiment is not as clear, “Perfectly acceptable. An engagement ring represents a status and stupidity, not love and commitment” (male, 22).

One of the most interesting themes was the suggestion that a fake diamond represented fake feelings. There was for some people the impression that, if an artificial stone was given, the commitment was not genuine. “You should get a real diamond, fake will show you don’t really care about the girl you’re [sic] marrying (male, 22). “Fake diamond = fake love” (male, 22).

In spite of the directions which stated that there was no deception involved, the concept arose in the responses a few times. “I think I would feel as though my fiancé was trying to ... a fast one on me, which isn’t a good sign if we’re going to get married” (female, 22).

The final two categories involve cheapness, both in quality of stone and in personal feelings. The delineation between the two was whether the response referred to the appearance of the stone or the feelings of the individual though that was not always clear. “Imitation diamonds are cheap and fake – if someone bought me one I would feel our love was cheap and fake” (female, 21).

The feeling of “cheapness” seemed to elicit emotional responses. “How would you feel if you fiancé offered you an engagement ring with an artificial diamond?” - “Mad, why couldn’t

he have just waited until he could afford a real diamond [sic]? Even if it is small, it's better than a fake one." (female, 21).

What was most interesting was when males were asked, "how would you feel if you offered your fiancé an engagement ring with an artificial diamond?" Over half of the responses referred to "manliness" or responsibility. "Like I'm not living up to the standards" (male, 22), "like less of a man" (male, 22), and "disappointed/failure" (male, 21) appeared more than once.

The sample consisted almost exclusively middle middle and upper middle class, predominantly white consumers. This limitation is severe in the case of counterfeit goods. A wide range of social classes, particularly those classes lower than those of the sample will yield results richer and more representative of the population. At the same time, the homogeneity of the sample increases confidence in the findings specific to this population.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Belk (1991) discussed the preference of natural gems over synthetic due to a fascination with rarity. While Belk and others may never feel simulated or manmade diamonds will never threaten the natural diamond market, these stones do influence consumer behavior.

The study of consumers' feelings about artificial diamonds has both theoretical and managerial implications. The lack of germane literature shows a void of understanding to be filled. This study is merely a first step in appreciating consumers' perceptions of artificial diamonds. Further understanding can potentially help to advance the study of luxury goods, counterfeit goods, conspicuous consumption, and reference groups' influence.

The implied association between diamond engagement rings and manliness, tradition and emotional reactions deserves further investigation. This study helped to uncover a few hints that significant connections may lie beneath the surface.

The emergence of masculinity as a theme is intriguing. The question arises as to whether it is specific to the rite of passage of providing an engagement ring, of becoming engaged, or of being engaged. Masculinity is front and center in many rites of passage. How is this different or similar?

Tradition in all things wedding related is very strong. Since the early 20th century, it has become commonplace for a man to wear a wedding band although the male engagement ring never caught on (Howard 2003), much about the engagement ring rite has remained traditionally masculine. Whether or not the couple shops for the ring together, it is still "he" who gives it to "she". Modern fairytale includes a young beau who has already purchased the ring when he gets down on one knee to propose.

Many customs in engagement and weddings are at odds with modern sex roles and yet tolerated here. In another study taken from the same general population, 71% of the respondents were classified as androgynous or undifferentiated rather than masculine or feminine using Bem's Sex Role Inventory (first author forthcoming). Understanding the social inconsistency could lead to much greater understanding of consumer behavior in engagements and weddings and facilitate marketing. With what products and/or target markets is a modern sex role the appropriate approach? When does one use traditional sex roles? Where is the line that separates the two?

The vehemence of some of the statements hints at the deep emotional meaning behind some types of jewelry. To what other types of jewelry does this extend? Is marriage and engagement jewelry unique in this aspect?

Aside from other social classes and subcultures, other areas to explore would be additional personality traits. For example, does fashion innovativeness extend to engagement rings? If it does, would that influence the likelihood of accepting an artificial diamond in order to be able to afford the latest style or size of stone?

How strongly do celebrities influence consumers as opinion leaders and reference groups? Do consumers who are enamored of celebrities and their lifestyles seek to emulate them in engagement rings and would that influence the likelihood of accepting an artificial diamond in order to be able to afford rings similar to their idols'? What subcultures are more prone to this influence?

Understanding more about acceptance of and resistance to artificial diamonds is beneficial to marketers of both natural and artificial diamond engagement rings. Deeper understanding of one's target market always facilitates creating marketing strategy for that market. For example, would it be more efficient to target females when marketing imitation diamonds? Discovering the perceptions of the product greatly enhances marketing's effectiveness. Knowing whether the most effective approach would be economy, fashion, versatility, or avoiding conflict diamonds, would be valuable.

Marketers of natural diamond jewelry would be better equipped to create marketing communications that play up the authenticity of natural diamonds by understanding the difference between consumers' feelings for artificial versus natural diamonds. It would be easier to communicate the competitive advantage of the natural stone.

In summary, studying the consumption meanings behind artificial diamond engagement rings would contribute to the theoretical literature, provide practitioner implications, and help us to better understand whether artificial diamonds are an honest substitute or a message of artificial affections.

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