Conversation Pieces: The Role of Products in Facilitating Conversation

by

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Business Administration
Duke University

March 17, 2017
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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Business Administration in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Positive social interactions and relationships are a fundamental human need, but it is not always easy to initiate conversations with potential relationship partners. Seven studies show the role that conversation pieces, or products that elicit questions and comments from others, can play in helping consumers to achieve their social goals. Studies 1 and 2 explore what makes a product a conversation piece and how different types of conversation pieces differentially affect social interactions. Studies 3-7 examine how observers (consumers who see another person displaying a conversation piece) use conversation pieces to facilitate social interactions. Studies 3 and 4 show that observers are more likely to approach people displaying conversation pieces than those who are not, as long as these products increase observers’ predictions of conversation quality. Study 5 demonstrates that observers generate better opening lines when they start a conversation with someone wearing a conversation piece than with someone who is not. Study 6 provides field experiment evidence that starting a conversation by asking about a conversation piece increases self-disclosure and improves perceived conversation quality, and study 7 explores the role of self-disclosure in conversations in more depth.
Dedication

In memory of Hilary Marie Rosenheim.
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1. Conversation Pieces: The Role of Products in Facilitating Conversation

1.1 Introduction

People need people. They benefit from spouses and childhood friends, a friendly acquaintance at the grocery store, and a smile from the barista. Positive social relationships contribute more to health and happiness than almost anything else in people’s lives (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Diener and Seligman 2002). However, it is not always easy for consumers to connect with others—other people, especially strangers, can be intimidating and are often times difficult to approach (Epley and Schroeder 2014). People need help making social connections, but what source can provide it? The current research investigates how consumers may turn to products, in particular conversation pieces, for assistance in initiating conversations and relationships with new people. While the term “conversation piece” is often used colloquially, it has not been previously defined in academic research, so the first part of this paper examines what exactly makes a product a conversation piece. Briefly, however, a conversation piece is a product that elicits questions and comments from other people, literally one that encourages conversation. For example, a tote bag from your alma mater might lead to comments from other alums or residents of the city where it is located, a brightly colored scarf might elicit compliments from others, or a souvenir mug from a national park, museum, or other tourist attraction could lead to a conversation about the place or the trip on which it was purchased.
This research provides an investigation into the characteristics of these types of products and an examination of the consequences of using them to facilitate conversation. In doing so, it provides a novel perspective on the social uses of products by examining how people’s consumption choices may facilitate conversation and thus relationship initiation or development. We propose that consumers use conversation pieces as tools to help them to identify people with whom they think they can have good conversations, initiate conversations with them, and ensure that these conversations go well. This research examines conversation pieces primarily from the perspective of the observer who sees another person using the conversation piece, although the perspective of the consumer who is using the conversation piece, called the owner or wearer, is brought in as needed. It addresses three main questions: first, what features characterize conversation pieces and how do these features influence the effects products have on conversations; second, are observers more likely to approach strangers who are displaying conversation pieces than those who are not; and third, are conversations that are started by conversation pieces perceived or experienced as different from those that are not and, critically, more successful in leading to better interactions?

We first consider what characteristics of a product contribute to it facilitating conversation and whether different characteristics lead to different types of conversations. We find that products that are attractive, attention grabbing, and
autobiographical are more likely to elicit comments than those that are not.

Furthermore, we examine the differing effects of these possession characteristics on what the resulting conversation is like and find that to the extent that a product is more attention grabbing and autobiographical, it leads to longer, more revealing conversations but that there is no effect of attractiveness on conversation length or depth.

Based on these findings we then shift our focus to the subset of conversation pieces that are attention grabbing and autobiographical because they seem most likely to have a significant impact on conversation quality and thus relationship development. We consider how and why these conversation pieces affect the likelihood a conversation between two strangers will occur, specifically the likelihood the observer will approach the owner to start a conversation. We argue that observers are more likely to approach strangers who are wearing conversation pieces than those who are not because they predict that they would have a better conversation with a person who is wearing a conversation piece than with one who is not. When the expected payoff of initiating an interaction is higher, observers are more likely to do so. Then we move our attention to how conversation pieces influence the conversation itself. We propose that if an observer uses a conversation piece to start a conversation, the resulting conversation is likely to be higher in self-disclosure and better—more enjoyable, more entertaining, more positive, etc.—than a conversation that is started other ways. This will lead observers to
like people with whom they converse that are wearing conversation pieces better than those who are not. Importantly, these effects do not require the observer and owner to match on some unique experience or characteristic, such as their alma mater, but just that the observer be interested in talking about the topic suggested by the product. This research is the first to investigate the role that products play in helping consumers to start conversations with strangers and adds to our understanding of how people form relationships and how consumers use products to achieve their social goals.

1.2 Theoretical Development

Importance and Challenges of Socialization. There has been a recent upsurge of consumer behavior research focused on consumer well-being and how consumption can improve people’s lives (see Mick, Pettigrew, Pechmann, and Ozanne 2008 for a review). Much of this research has focused on consumers’ physical or financial health, but research from psychology and sociology suggests that consumers’ social connections are equally important in determining their health and happiness (Diener and Seligman 2002). The need to connect with others is one of the fundamental motivators of human behavior, second only in importance to people’s basic physiological needs (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, and Shaller 2010). Not having social connections contributes to both physical and mental illness (Thoits 1995), whereas both positive long-term relationships and brief, friendly social interactions with others contribute to well-being (Diener and Seligman 2002; Sandstrom and Dunn 2014).
Unfortunately, increasing numbers of consumers do not have as many positive relationships as they would like (Cacioppo and Patrick 2008). One reason for this is that many people struggle to initiate relationships with other people, reporting high levels of fear and anxiety about talking to strangers (Cheek and Buss 1981) and predicting conversations with strangers will be very unpleasant. However, research has shown that these conversations are generally not as unpleasant as people fear they will be (Epley and Schroeder 2014), and by not having these conversations with strangers, people miss out on brief, pleasant social interactions that could brighten their day (Sandstrom and Dunn 2014), or, since most new friends and romantic partners start out as strangers, miss out on developing potential relationships (Sunnafrank and Ramirez 2004). Given the importance of these initial interactions, in this paper we look at the role that conversation pieces play in facilitating them. The quality of these initial interactions is also important in determining whether they will lead to a relationship (Sprecher and Duck 1994; Human, Sandstrom, Biesanz, Dunn 2012), so we examine whether conversation pieces influence conversation quality as well.

Products and Social Goals. Although how consumers may use products to encourage conversations has not been specifically examined, there is extensive research on signaling that shows that consumers use products to achieve their social goals. Consumers publically display certain products to try to make a positive impression on others. Luxury products that signal wealth and social status are the most prototypical
signals (Hopkins and Kornienko 2004), but consumers also use products to signal other positive traits, such as competence (Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan 2014) or autonomy (Warren and Campbell 2014). Consumers also strategically use and avoid certain products to signal aspects of their identity or group affiliation (Escalas and Bettman 2003; Berger and Heath 2008).

Similarly, consumers strategically consume in order to fit in with others or make themselves desirable affiliation partners. Mead, Baumeister, Stillman, Rawn and Vohs (2011) found that after social exclusion, consumers strategically “match” their consumption choices with those of potential affiliation partners. Similarly, lonely consumers consume majority endorsed products in public rather than the minority endorsed ones they prefer in private because of concerns about being negatively evaluated (Wang, Zhu, and Shiv 2012).

**Word of Mouth.** Research on word of mouth shows that consumers frequently talk about products, particularly when they need something to say to fill conversational space (Berger 2014). In face to face conversations, they are especially likely to talk about easily accessible products, such as products that are in view (Berger and Schwartz 2011). A conversation with a stranger seems like an especially likely situation in which to talk about a product, since conversation pieces are attention grabbing and meeting someone for the first time is a situation in which people are likely to want to fill conversational space.
While these two literatures are related to conversations, we argue that conversation pieces can play a much broader role in social interactions than signals or word of mouth have been shown to do. Signals are intended to influence the observer’s attitude toward the person displaying the product, which may in turn influence interaction likelihood or quality, but previous research has not examined whether signals influence how likely a conversation is to occur or how it unfolds. We argue that conversation pieces influence the conversation more directly, facilitating conversations that might otherwise not occur and changing what is talked about in the conversation. Similarly, research on word of mouth has primarily examined how it influences consumers’ attitudes toward the product rather than their interactions with each other. We argue that conversation pieces can play a key role in facilitating relationship initiation, and in order to examine this process we propose a new model of how products influence conversations.

1.3 Conceptual Model

What is a Conversation Piece? Before examining how conversation pieces influence social interactions, we first examine the key characteristics that distinguish products that tend to facilitate conversation from those that do not. To facilitate conversation, a product must first be visible and attract the attention of the observer. We propose that the more a product grabs the attention of an observer, the more likely it is to be mentioned in conversation. A number of different features of a product, such as bright
colors or large size, can make it more likely to grab an observer’s attention. One especially important feature for conversation pieces is uniqueness. Prior research has found that unique products tend to attract attention more than do conventional ones (Huang, Dong, and Wyer forthcoming).

Once a product has attracted attention, an observer must choose to comment on it for it to be a conversation piece. Here social norms influence which products tend to become conversation pieces. When talking to someone for the first time, people tend to be polite and positive (Jones and Wortman 1973). Since compliments are a common form of politeness (Holmes 1988), and more attractive products should elicit more compliments than less attractive ones, we propose that more attractive products will elicit more comments overall than will less attractive ones.

Finally, observers will be more likely to comment on products that suggest that they could have a conversation about something they want to talk about. People enjoy hearing familiar experiences from others so they may comment on a product that suggests they are similar to the observer. Or people also think they will enjoy hearing about new things (even if it then turns out that they do not) so they may comment on a product that they find curious or interesting (Cooney, Gilbert, and Wilson forthcoming). The products that suggest these topics of conversation are generally ones that reveal something about the wearer’s own life experiences—ones that are autobiographical.
Therefore, we propose that autobiographical products are also more likely to be conversation pieces. In sum, we hypothesize

**H1:** Conversation pieces are more attractive, attention grabbing, and autobiographical than non-conversation pieces.

We then examine the effect of these key characteristics on the types of conversations that these products lead to. Not all products that generate comments will lead to the same length, depth, or types of conversations. In particular, we examine the impact of product characteristics on the length and depth of conversations. If the product is tied to an autobiographical experience the owner has had—something that they have done or some event that has happened to them in their lives—then a comment or question on it, can give them the chance to tell a story about it, which would be a longer, more in depth conversation. In contrast, giving a compliment (the likely response to an attractive product) is a short, formalized interaction that does not facilitate a long, in depth discussion (Manes and Wolfson 1981). The effect of how attention grabbing a product is on the types of conversation it leads to is less clear—unique products that require explanation will likely lead to a longer, more in depth conversations, but if it simply attracts attention because, for example, it is brightly colored, it is less likely to do so. Thus we propose
**H2:** To the extent that a conversation piece is more autobiographical and attention grabbing, it should lead to longer, deeper conversations. However, attractiveness will not be correlated with conversation length or depth.

We now move to the model of how conversation pieces influence social interactions. In this model we exclusively look at conversation pieces that are unique and/or autobiographical as those seem most likely to lead to positive conversations and thus potentially relationship development. We build on the literature on social goals and word of mouth to create a model of how consumers use conversation pieces to facilitate conversation. Table 1 is a proposed model detailing the stages of a conversation and the outcomes that conversation pieces may affect at each stage. That is, table 1 outlines how consumers use conversation pieces as tools to help them have good conversations and form connections with strangers. The table attempts to provide a comprehensive, although certainly not exhaustive, look at the phenomenon of conversation piece usage over the course of the interaction between a conversation piece owner and observer.
Table 1: Model of Role of Conversation Pieces in Relationship Development

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Stage of Conversation</th>
<th>Focal Questions (DV Name)</th>
<th>Study</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Before Conversation</strong></td>
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</table>
| Owner decides whether to display a conversation piece | How likely is the owner to display a conversation piece? (Likelihood to Wear)  
How does the owner think displaying a conversation piece will affect their conversations? (Perceived Conversational Value) | Pre-study 1  
Pre-study 2 |
| Observer predicts conversation quality with owner | How good a conversation does the observer think they will have with the owner? (Predicted Conversation Quality) | Study 3  
Study 4 |
| Observer decides whether or not to approach owner | How likely is the observer to approach the owner? (Likelihood to Approach) | Study 3  
Study 4 |
| **During Conversation** |                                                                                          |                               |
| Observer starts conversation with owner | Does the observer mention the conversation piece? (Mention)  
Will the opening line lead to a good conversation? (Opening Line Quality) | Study 5  
Study 6 |
| Owner and observer self-disclose to each other | How much self-disclosure is there overall in the conversation? (Overall Self-Disclosure)  
How much self-disclosure is there early in conversation? (Fast Tracking) | Study 6  
Study 7 |
| Conversation goes well or poorly | How much does the observer enjoy the conversation? (Perceived Conversation Quality) | Study 6  
Study 7 (n.s.) |
| **After Conversation** |                                                                                          |                               |
| Post-conversation evaluation | How much does the observer like the owner? (Liking) | Study 6  
Study 7 (n.s.) |

1.3.1 Effect of Conversation Pieces Before the Conversation

In order to provide a complete view of how conversation pieces influence conversations, the chart begins with the owner’s decision to display a conversation piece. We briefly investigated the owner’s perspective in two pre-studies as well as the
descriptive studies that start the paper. Pre-study 1 showed that consumers are more likely to wear conversation pieces when they have the goal to meet new people (versus a goal to spend time with friends), and pre-study 2 showed that owners consider graphic t-shirts to be conversation pieces. However, in this paper we focus our investigation on how observers use conversation pieces to facilitate their social interactions because it is already known that consumers publically display products to achieve their social goals (Berger and Heath 2008; Griskevicius, Tybur, Van Den Bergh 2010). There is much less research related to how observers use products that other people are displaying to achieve their social goals. Therefore, we will not mention the studies examining the owner’s goals further in the dissertation, but details are provided in Appendix A.

Predicted Conversation Quality. The observer’s role in the model starts when they see a person displaying a conversation piece at an event where they are interested in meeting new people. The observer must decide whether or not they want to approach this person and start a conversation with them. One factor that influences this decision is how good a conversation they think they will have with the owner. We argue that observers predict they will have better conversations with strangers wearing conversation pieces than with those who are not. This is because the conversation piece suggests an opening line of conversation to the observer: asking about the conversation piece. This line is likely to lead to a conversation about the topic the product suggests, and assuming this topic is of interest to the observer, observers predict that this
conversation will be better than the conversation they would have had if they had not been able to use a conversation piece to start the conversation.

**H3:** Being able to start a conversation by mentioning the conversation piece increases observers’ predictions of how good the conversation will be.

*Likelihood to Approach.* Observers’ predictions of conversation quality are important because they are a significant factor in observers’ likelihood to approach the owner. Starting a conversation with a stranger is somewhat risky, but if observers think that they can have a good conversation with the person they are approaching, the risks of starting the conversation may seem more worthwhile and thus observers will be more likely to approach.

**H4:** Conversation pieces increase observers’ likelihood to approach by increasing observers’ predictions of how good the conversation will be.

However, conversation pieces would only be expected to increase predicted conversation quality, and thus likelihood to approach, if they suggest the observer could have a good conversation with the owner. If the conversation topic suggested by the product is off-putting or simply totally uninteresting to the observer, there is no reason to think that the observer would enjoy a conversation about it and thus approach.
**H5:** If a conversation piece suggests a topic observers would not enjoy discussing, observers will not be more likely to approach.

### 1.3.2 Effect of Conversation Pieces During and After the Conversation

The first part of the model examines how conversation pieces exert their influence before the conversation starts. In the second part of the model, we examine how conversation pieces influence what happens during a conversation. We first examine whether they influence how the conversation gets started—what the observer says to start the conversation. We propose that when an owner is displaying a conversation piece, observers will frequently mention it as an opening line to start the conversation. This is because conversation pieces are publically visible and tend to be eye-catching, and consumers frequently talk about easily accessible products (Berger and Schwartz 2011).

**H6a:** If an owner’s conversation piece is visible, observers will frequently start conversations by mentioning it.

**H6b:** Observers will be more likely to mention products that are conversation pieces than products that are not.

We then turn our attention to the implications of starting a conversation by asking about a conversation piece. We focus on two dependent variables—self-
disclosure and perceived conversation quality—that have been found to lead strangers to be interested in getting to know each other better (Collins and Miller 1994; Human et al. 2012).

**Self-Disclosure.** Most ritualized conversational openings, such as “Nice weather,” or “How’s it going?” (Coupland, Coupland and Robinson 1992; Laver 1981) lead to generic, shallow conversations. In contrast, conversation pieces can reveal something about the owner, which enables the observer to start the conversation in a more personalized and targeted way. This personalized opening sets the tone for the conversation (Schegloff 1986), which should increase self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is the communication of personally relevant information, thoughts, and feelings to another person (Jourard 1971). High levels of self-disclosure reliably contribute to positive feelings of closeness and liking between people (Collins and Miller 1994). Self-disclosure improves relationships both by leading the listener to like the discloser more (Sprecher, Treger, and Wondra 2012) and the discloser to like the listener more (Archer, Berg, and Runge 1980). While excessively intimate disclosures can backfire on the discloser (Omarzu 2000), the disclosures facilitated by products are generally on the less intimate side of effective disclosure and do not approach these levels.

We also look specifically at when the disclosure occurs in the conversation to study a phenomenon we call “fast tracking.” Prior research shows that most first meeting conversations follow a predictable path in which disclosure increases over the
course of the conversation (Berger and Calabrese 1975). However, we propose that by asking a question about a conversation piece, an observer can “fast track” the conversation by skipping or truncating the mundane, ritualized introductory phase. We measure fast tracking by looking specifically at the level of disclosure early in the conversation: Higher levels of disclosure early in the conversation are considered to be evidence of fast tracking. Note that this does not mean that conversations started by asking about conversation pieces will end up having greater disclosure levels at the end of the conversation than conversations started in other ways, but just that they will skip the low disclosure phase of the conversation.

**H7a:** Conversations that are started by asking about a conversation piece are rated higher in overall self-disclosure than are conversations that are started in other ways.

**H7b:** Conversations that are started by asking about a conversation piece lead to higher rated levels of self-disclosure early in the conversation than do conversations started in other ways.

*Perceived Conversation Quality and Liking.* Hypothesis 5 proposes that observers will *predict* that they will have better conversations with people who are wearing conversation pieces than with those who are not, but people’s predictions for social
situations do not always align with their perceptions of what occurs (Epley and Schroeder 2014). However, in this case we predict that they will: Perceived conversation quality will actually be higher, i.e., conversations will be more enjoyable, more entertaining, more positive, etc.—when the conversation is started by asking about a conversation piece than in another way. Since self-disclosure is inherently enjoyable (Tamir and Mitchell 2012), this is due in part to increased levels of self-disclosure, but conversation pieces can also improve conversations by enabling observers to talk about more enjoyable topics. People generally only start a conversation by asking about the conversation piece if it suggests something they want to talk about. Therefore, these topics are pre-selected to be of interest to the observer, whereas other topics, such as the weather, are more likely to be topics of desperation rather than ones that really pique the observer’s interest. Since owners are unlikely to display conversation pieces related to topics they are not interested in, this topic should be appealing to the owner as well. If both people are talking about a topic that they like, the resulting conversation is generally perceived as higher quality, and having a positive and enjoyable experience with another builds bonds and increases liking (Reis et al. 2010; Fraley and Aron 2004; Sprecher and Duck 1994).

**H8:** Conversations that are started by asking about a conversation piece will have higher perceived quality than conversations that are started in other ways.
Finally, we test whether the positive effects of conversation pieces extend to interpersonal evaluations.

**H9:** Conversations that are started by asking about a conversation piece lead the observer to like the owner more than conversations started in other ways.

### 1.3.3 Overview of the Studies

Seven studies are presented in this paper. Study 1 is a structured interview study examining the characteristics of products that facilitate conversation and the characteristics of the conversations they facilitate. Study 2 draws on the findings from study 1 to replicate these product and conversation characteristics in a larger, more diverse sample and determine the linkages between product and conversation characteristics. In studies 3-7, we narrow our focus to just examining conversation pieces that grab an observer’s attention and are autobiographical for the owner. These five studies explore how these conversation pieces (relative to non-conversation pieces) influence the different stages of a conversation from the observer’s perspective. The first two studies of the paper examine how conversation pieces influence how *likely* a person is to approach someone else to talk. Study 3 looks at whether observers are more likely to approach people who are wearing conversation pieces, and study 4 shows a boundary condition on this effect, namely that the observers must predict that the conversation piece will lead to a good conversation. Study 5 starts to examine the
influence of a conversation piece on the conversation and finds that observers generate “better” opening lines—lines that are rated as more likely to lead to high levels of self-disclosure and high levels of perceived conversation enjoyment—when they are asked to start a conversation with a stranger wearing a conversation piece rather than one not wearing a conversation piece. Study 6 is a field experiment that provides evidence that starting a conversation by asking about a conversation piece increases self-disclosure, improves perceived conversation quality and increases liking. Study 7 looks at fast tracking more precisely, providing a more controlled look at how conversation pieces affect when self-disclosure occurs in conversations. Given the different specific questions asked in each of these studies, we use a variety of different paradigms to investigate the questions of interest.

1.4 Study 1: Interviews

We begin with a set of structured interviews in which participants were asked how they have met new people and made friends and the role that possessions have played in these interactions. These interviews were designed as a first step to determine whether participants used conversation pieces and to get an initial sense of what types of products were conversation pieces and what types of conversations they tended to facilitate.
1.4.1 Method

Twenty-one first year MBA students and undergraduate students (52% male) were recruited to participate in this study. Participants responded to recruitment flyers, which advertised an “Interview Study.” Interviews were approximately 30 minutes in length and were conducted in person by the author over the course of about one month. All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed.

Interviews began by asking participants to describe how they had met people and made friends when arriving at Duke for either their MBA or undergraduate degree (see Appendix B for all interview questions). If participants did not mention commenting on other people’s possessions or having other people comment on their own possessions, we then asked more directly about any product facilitated conversations they had had. Then participants were asked how they chose their clothing and about their experiences with other people commenting on their products. Finally, the words “conversation piece” were introduced to the interview, and participants were asked to describe any conversation pieces that they had.

1.4.2 Results

We looked at two main questions in this study: first, what are the characteristics of possessions that tended to elicit conversation (i.e., of conversation pieces) and second, what types of conversations do these conversation pieces facilitate.
Conversation Piece Characteristics. We first examined the participants’ descriptions of the products that they said had facilitated a conversation to determine if there were any common characteristics among these items. Three characteristics of products that facilitate conversation emerged from the data: being attractive, attention grabbing, and having an autobiographical story or experience associated with them. First, many participants said that they commented on or received comments on physically attractive products: according to Sarah, “…if someone had a pretty dress, I’ll just be like, oh that’s a pretty dress.” Second, many of the items that received comments were attention grabbing in some way. Some attracted attention due to their bright colors or design. For example, when asked about what types of things she tends to comment on, Samantha said, “Oh, I like, I like brightness, anything that catches my eyes.” Others attracted attention because they were unique. When describing a conversation piece in her home, Lauren says, “…they’re tribal wall hangings, it’s got tribal symbols on it, it’s from Hawaii… It definitely bring[s] up conversation because it’s a unique piece, people always want to know how did I get that.” Finally, conversation pieces frequently had autobiographical stories about prior experiences or interests of the owner. For example, Alison said that people often commented on the album covers she had displayed on the walls of her dorm room: “People would ask me about bands that the records are from…with bands it’s easy to be like, oh, have you seen them in concert? Yeah, I did.”
Where? You know, and go on from that. Because that tends to be a solid experience that facilitate conversations.”

Conversational Characteristics. We also examined the characteristics of conversations that were facilitated by conversation pieces. We identified three different dimensions on which these conversations varied: length, depth, and how they got started. The conversations described clearly varied in length and depth: Some conversation piece mentions led to short, close-ended conversations (Carrie said, “I have some nice outfits. Sometimes when I’m wearing them, people will be like, “oh you look really nice,” and I’m like, “oh, thank you.”) that end after a few exchanges. Other items led to more extended conversations. For example, when observers mention Lauren’s tribal wall hangings, “They really want to know where I got it from, right, so that brings up a conversation and you can talk about it. And that brings up travels, and you tend to ask other people if they have traveled and so forth, so it’s definitely a conversation builder.”

The final dimension that varied between these conversations was how the conversation piece was initially mentioned in the conversation. We identified five common ways that conversation pieces started conversations: 1) complimenting the owner on their item’s appearance, 2) questioning the owner about where they got their item, 3) asking the owner to clarify something about their item, 4) expressing interest and potential similarity with the owner on the basis of their item, and 5) expressing
interest, but not similarity, with the owner on the basis of their item. As illustrated by the examples told by Carrie and Sarah above, people regularly compliment the appearance of others’ possessions. People also frequently ask others where they got their possession, either in terms of the store where they purchased it, or if it looks like it might be a travel souvenir, the city or country where they purchased it. Sometimes people ask for clarification about products that they find confusing: Nick says, “There’s also another t-shirt that I like wearing, it says ‘I heart BJ.’ And a lot of people look at it and they’re like, what is that supposed to mean? And then, but it’s actually from Beijing.”

Another common way to start a conversation about a possession is by referring to a point of potential similarity between the observer and owner that the product suggests: Julia says, “I remember my freshman year, one of the guys that I became friends with, he had on his Duke Golf backpack…and so I was like, oh, cool backpack, you must play golf. I really like golf.” Finally, many people start conversations about possessions by expressing interest in the topic they suggest, even if it does not suggest a point of similarity between them and its owner: Nick says, “If they’ve got [a] UNC…basketball…jersey, then I’d know, okay this person is a[t] UNC, but he only watches basketball…I mean, I don’t know anything about basketball right now, so, but even that could be a conversation starter. So, just explain to me, in basketball, where they do this or do that, you know, what does that actually mean? Because I don’t really
know. And that, they are usually keen to talk about this. Because they’re obviously fans.”

1.4.3 Discussion

In this qualitative study we identified three main characteristics of an item—how attractive, attention grabbing, and autobiographical it is—that contribute to facilitating conversations and three dimensions—length, depth, and how the conversation gets started—that affect evaluations of the conversations that these products facilitate. By using in depth interviews of participants, this study enables us to capture some of the variety and richness of conversation pieces and the roles that they play in people’s social lives. However, due to the design of these interviews, it was not possible to determine whether the conversation piece characteristics we identified are really unique to conversation pieces or whether they describe possessions more generally. The small sample size and qualitative nature of the data also make it impossible to assess the relative strength or frequency of these conversation piece characteristics or map these two sets of constructs together to identify which conversation piece characteristics contribute to which particular conversational characteristics. Therefore, in Study 2, we have a much larger set of participants describe a broader range of possessions and the conversations that result from them.
1.5 Study 2: Mapping Possession Characteristics to Conversational Characteristics

In Study 2, we examine which possession characteristics affect 1) whether and how frequently a product facilitates conversations, 2) the length and depth of any resulting conversation, and 3) how any resulting conversations get started. To address these questions, participants wrote about and photographed a possession that they regularly publicly displayed that frequently, occasionally, or almost never facilitated conversations. Then they rated this product on a variety of adjectives intended to map onto the three themes identified through the interviews and evaluated the characteristics of the conversations that their possession generally facilitated. Although the bulk of this paper examines the observer’s perspective on conversation pieces, since this study had the goal to characterize conversation pieces, here owners describe their own items since they have a more informed and nuanced perspective on them.

1.5.1 Method

Participants and Design. Three-hundred and seven participants (average age = 36 years old, 56% male) were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk to participate in this study. This study had a three cell between-subjects design (item type: frequent conversation piece, occasional conversation piece, non-conversation piece). All participants were included in the analysis.

Procedure. Participants were first asked to describe an item they owned that other people regularly saw. Depending on condition, they were asked to describe an item that
other people frequently commented on, occasionally commented on, or almost never commented on. They were asked to state what the item was, describe its physical appearance (size, color, material, and whether there were any words or images on it), and whether there was a story associated with it. Then they answered a series of questions about their item, indicating its characteristics and the characteristics of the conversations that it leads to. Finally, participants were asked to upload a photo of their item. Since we predicted many participants did not physically have their item with them while they were taking their survey, participants received a link to a second survey that gave them approximately 48 hours to upload a photo of their item.

*Measures.* To assess the item’s characteristics, participants read a list of 18 adjectives (e.g., unique, bold, personal; see Appendix F for a complete list) and evaluated the extent to which that adjective was an accurate descriptor of their possession. A factor analysis of these items revealed that these adjectives broke down into three factors, one assessing how attractive the item was (three items, \( \alpha = .70 \)), one assessing the degree to which item was attention grabbing (nine items; \( \alpha = .92 \)), and one assessing the degree to which the item was autobiographical (five items; \( \alpha = .79 \)). See Appendix F for the questions associated with each factor.

To assess the length of the conversations their item led to, participants were asked “When someone comments on this item, how long do you generally talk about the item or the topic that it relates to?” To assess depth they were asked: “If someone
comments on this item, how much do you generally reveal about yourself in your response?” Finally, participants read descriptions of the five common ways that observers can start conversations about products as identified in Study 1: 1) by complimenting you on the appearance of your item, 2) by asking you where you got your item, 3) by asking you to clarify or explain something about your item, 4) by asking a question or making a comment about your item that expresses interest and similarity, 5) by asking a question or making a comment about your item that expresses interest but NOT similarity. They then indicated how frequently people who saw their item started conversations with them in those ways, as well as some additional questions about their item: how they acquired it, how much it was worth, and whether it has words or pictures on it. Participants also answered a manipulation check indicating how frequently others commented on their item when it was visible.

1.5.2 Results

Manipulation check. The manipulation check measuring how frequently items were mentioned showed that the manipulation successfully influenced the items that participants wrote about \((F (2, 304) = 120.39, p < .0001)\). Participants wrote about items that elicited more frequent comments in the frequent conversation piece condition \((M = 3.68)\) than in the occasional conversation piece condition \((M = 3.10)\), which was more frequent than in the non-conversation piece condition \((M = 1.57)\). All differences were statistically significant \((ps < .0001)\).
Product Categories. The item descriptions were coded to indicate what product category they fit into (e.g., clothing, accessories, electronics, etc.). Table 2 shows the product categories of the items participants described. Clothing and decorative home items emerged as the largest product categories for conversation pieces.

Table 2: Product Categories of Possessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Category</th>
<th>Conversation Pieces (frequent and occasional combined)</th>
<th>Non-conversation pieces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clothing</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessories</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewelry</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decorative Home Items</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional Home Items</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cars</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Possession Characteristics. To address hypothesis 1, we examined how conversation pieces differed from non-conversation pieces and how frequent conversation pieces differed from occasional conversation pieces in terms of how attractive, attention grabbing, and autobiographical they were. For all of these factors, there were significant differences between non-conversation pieces and both frequent and occasional conversation pieces, but no differences between occasional and frequent conversation pieces. For attractiveness, the overall effect of condition was significant ($F (2, 304) = 13.10, p < .0001$), and non-conversation pieces were considered to be less attractive ($M = 4.72$) than either occasional conversation pieces ($M = 5.40; F (1, 304) = 15.07, p = .0001$) or frequent conversation pieces ($M = 5.58; F (1, 304) = 23.29, p < .0001$).
For how autobiographical they were, the overall effect of condition was significant ($F(2, 304) = 6.42, p = .002$) and non-conversation pieces were considered to be less autobiographical ($M = 3.77$) than either occasional conversation pieces ($M = 4.49; F(1, 304) = 12.33, p = .0005$) or frequent conversation pieces ($M = 4.26; F(1, 304) = 5.59, p = .02$). For how attention grabbing they were, the overall effect of condition was significant ($F(2, 304) = 39.68, p < .0001$) and non-conversation pieces were considered to be less attention grabbing ($M = 3.00$) than either occasional conversation pieces ($M = 4.44; F(1, 304) = 50.90, p < .0001$) or frequent conversation pieces ($M = 4.68; F(1, 304) = 66.84, p < .0001$). Thus, supporting hypothesis 1, it seems that conversation pieces are more attractive, attention grabbing, and autobiographical than non-conversation pieces, but within the set of products that are conversation pieces, these characteristics do not affect how frequently a conversation piece is mentioned.

We also looked for other differences between conversation pieces and non-conversation pieces. Conversation pieces and non-conversation pieces did not differ in terms of their worth or how they were acquired ($ps > .27$), reducing concerns that conversation pieces are just generally different or better than non-conversation pieces. Conversation pieces were more likely to have non-branded words and images on them than were non-conversation pieces ($28\%$ v. $17\%; \chi^2 = 4.89, p = .027$), but as the majority of conversation pieces did not have words or images it appears that while words and
images can contribute to an item being a conversation piece, it is not the sole, or even primary, factor.

**Linking Possession Characteristics to Conversation Characteristics.** While these possession characteristics do not seem to influence whether a conversation piece elicits comments frequently or occasionally, we now examine whether they affect the nature of the conversations they facilitate (e.g., how long and deep they are and how they start). To answer this question, we focused on the subset of participants who wrote about frequent or occasional conversation pieces (n = 204) as participants in the non-conversation piece condition were explicitly asked to think of products that did not facilitate conversations. As suggested by Study 1, we looked at correlations between the identified characteristics and conversation length, depth, and how it gets started. First looking at length, we found that the extent to which a conversation piece was attention grabbing ($r = .31, p < .0001$) or autobiographical ($r = .44, p < .0001$) was positively correlated with conversation length. There was no relationship between how attractive the conversation piece was and conversation length ($r = .048, p = .49$). Similarly, more attention grabbing ($r = .31, p < .0001$) and autobiographical ($r = .44, p < .0001$) conversation pieces were correlated with more revealing conversations, but there was no correlation between the conversation piece’s attractiveness and how revealing the conversations it led to were ($r = -.07, p = .35$). These results support hypothesis two.
We then looked at the relationship between the characteristics of the conversation pieces and how the conversations they facilitate get started. More attention grabbing and autobiographical conversation pieces were at least marginally associated with increased instances of all five types of conversation (see table 3 for correlations). However, more attractive products were only positively associated with higher levels of conversations that were started by a compliment on the appearance of the item and those that were started by asking where the owner acquired the item.

**Table 3: Correlations between Conversation Piece Characteristics and Conversation Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opening Line</th>
<th>Attractive</th>
<th>Autobiographical</th>
<th>Attention Grabbing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appearance compliment</td>
<td>.47 (p &lt; .0001)</td>
<td>.12 (p = .081)</td>
<td>.43 (p &lt; .0001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where did you get item?</td>
<td>.17 (p = .017)</td>
<td>.24 (p = .001)</td>
<td>.30 (p &lt; .0001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarify something about item</td>
<td>-.13 (p = .058)</td>
<td>.34 (p &lt; .0001)</td>
<td>.27 (p &lt; .0001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity</td>
<td>.10 (p = .15)</td>
<td>.45 (p &lt; .0001)</td>
<td>.30 (p &lt; .0001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest without similarity</td>
<td>.04 (p = .59)</td>
<td>.14 (p = .046)</td>
<td>.26 (p &lt; .0001)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**1.5.3 Discussion**

This study shows that how attractive, attention grabbing, and autobiographical a possession is influences whether and how it is talked about. Possessions that are attractive, attention grabbing, and autobiographical are more likely to be talked about
than those that are not. However, we find that within the category of conversation pieces, these factors do not influence whether the possession attracts comments occasionally or frequently. Instead, these factors influence the type of conversations mentioning the possession leads to. More attention grabbing and autobiographical items seem to lead to conversations that start in a wide variety of ways, but are generally longer and more revealing. In contrast, attractiveness does not affect how long or revealing a conversation is, and higher levels of attractiveness are only positively correlated with compliments and asking where you got the product, more close-ended conversation topics.

1.6 Study 3: Likelihood to Approach

In the remainder of the studies in this paper, we examine conversation pieces that are attention grabbing and autobiographical. We focus on these because study 2 suggests that they will lead to long and revealing conversations, which seem likely to have the biggest impact on relationship development. In the remaining studies, we further limit the scope of our investigation to wearable conversation pieces, in particular t-shirts. Although studies 1 and 2 showed that a wide variety of products, from shirts, to paintings, to cars, can be conversation pieces, we focus on clothing because it is a commonly studied signal of social status and group membership (Nelissen and Meijers 2011; Berger and Heath 2008) and is publically displayed, portable, and can be strategically changed to meet a person’s temporary social goals. Therefore, in the
remainder of the studies the person who is displaying the conversation piece is called the wearer. In these studies, we operationalize a conversation piece as a t-shirt with words and pictures on it and a non-conversation piece as a plain t-shirt. T-shirts are especially useful because it is easy to manipulate whether or not they are attention grabbing and autobiographical without altering the other aspects of the product.

Studies 3-7 examine how observers use conversation pieces in social situations. In study 3 we test hypotheses 4 and 5 and look at how conversation pieces influence an observer’s willingness to approach a stranger. We do this by using a forced choice paradigm that mimics the common scenario of being at a party, seeing multiple people, and having to decide which person to approach. We hypothesize that participants will be more likely to approach a person who is wearing a conversation piece than a person who is not and that participants will expect that conversations with a person wearing a conversation piece will result in higher conversation quality.

1.6.1 Method

Participants and Design. Two hundred and three participants (average age = 32 years old, 53% male) were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk to participate in this study. The study had a single cell design with a forced choice dependent variable.

Procedure. Participants were first asked to imagine that they were at a casual party where they wanted to meet new people. This scenario is one for which participants can easily imagine that wearing a t-shirt is socially acceptable and
participants’ desires to meet new people are active. Participants were then shown pictures of three men who were identical except for the shirt they were wearing. A variety of factors, such as attractiveness and facial expressions, can influence approach (Prestia, Silverston, Wood, and Zigarmi 2002; Willis, Palermo, and Burke 2011). In this study we tried to control for these factors by using the same person in each shirt.

Based on the results of pre-study 2 and study 2, we manipulated whether the person was wearing a conversation piece by manipulating whether they were wearing a graphic or plain shirt. The graphic shirt had the words “Yellowstone National Park” and a silhouette of an elk on it (see Appendix G for shirt images). There were two control shirts: a solid colored t-shirt and a solid colored button up shirt. We included the button up shirt in the study to enable us to assess whether observers were attracted to the person in the conversation piece or avoiding the person in the plain shirt. In addition, a within-subjects post-test with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction (n = 94) showed that the person in the button up shirt was seen as more attractive (M = 5.10) than the person in the plain shirt (M = 4.80; F(1, 145.33) = 10.02, p = .002) or in the Yellowstone shirt (M = 4.77; F(1, 145.33) = 12.28, p = .0006). Since people are attracted to physically attractive others (Prestia et al. 2002), if participants were more likely to approach the person in the conversation piece than the button up shirt it would provide strong support for our hypothesis.
The photos were shown on a single screen, and the order (from left to right) in which they were presented was counterbalanced across participants. Participants were told that they could only approach one of these people and were asked which one they wanted to approach. Then they answered the questions described in the measures section below.

**Measures.** In addition to indicating which person they wanted to approach, participants also answered five items measuring about how good, enjoyable, easy, awkward (reverse coded), and forced (reverse coded) a conversation they expected to have with the person they chose to approach (e.g., “How enjoyable do you think the conversation with the person you selected would be?”) for a composite conversation quality score (α = .88). Participants also answered some additional questions about the potential interaction.

### 1.6.2 Results

**Likelihood to Approach.** Thirty-two percent of participants approached the person in the button up shirt, 17% approached the person in the plain shirt, and 51% approached the person in the Yellowstone shirt. These proportions differed significantly from what would be predicted by chance (χ² (2) = 35.5, p < .0001). Significantly more participants approached the person in the button up shirt than the plain shirt (p = .005, exact binomial test). More relevantly, significantly more participants approached the person in the Yellowstone shirt than the person in the plain shirt (p < .0001, exact
binomial test) or the person in the button up shirt (\( p = .003 \), exact binomial test), providing support for hypothesis 4.

**Predicted Conversation Quality.** Participants’ predicted conversation quality varied by whom they decided to approach (\( F (2, 200) = 3.83, \ p = .023 \)). Participants who chose to approach the person in the Yellowstone t-shirt predicted that they would have a better conversation (\( M_{\text{Yellowstone}} = 4.83 \)) than did those who chose to approach the person in the plain t-shirt (\( M_{\text{Plain}} = 4.31, F (1, 200) = 7.53, p = .007 \)). Predicted conversation quality with the person in the button up shirt was between these two extremes and did not differ significantly from either \( M_{\text{button-up}} = 4.65, p_s > .1 \). These data provide some initial support for hypothesis 3.

### 1.6.3 Discussion

These results show that observers are more likely to approach people who are wearing conversation pieces than those who are not. In this study we compared a conversation piece to a plain t-shirt and to a button up shirt. This is a relatively conservative test because the person in the button up shirt was rated as more attractive than the person in the conversation piece, but observers were still more likely to approach the person in the conversation piece.

We also began to investigate why observers are more likely to approach a person wearing a conversation piece than a person who is not wearing a conversation piece. These results provide initial support for hypothesis 3 but are somewhat difficult to
interpret because participants self-selected which person they wanted to approach. Therefore, in study 4 participants are randomly assigned to view a person who is wearing a conversation piece or not and then indicate how likely they would be to approach them.

1.7 Study 4: A Boundary Condition on Likelihood to Approach

Study 3 shows one example of when observers are more likely to approach people who are wearing conversation pieces than those who are not, but it does not directly examine why this is the case. In study 4 we aim to replicate this effect and to examine the influence of observers’ predicted conversation quality on their likelihood to approach, testing hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. We assess the role of predicted conversation quality in two ways. First, we include an additional control condition in the study. We compare a conversation piece that was designed to lead observers to predict they would have a good conversation with the wearer to both a non-conversation piece (a plain t-shirt) and to a shirt that is a conversation piece, but is one that we thought would lead observers to think they would not have a good conversation with the wearer. Consistent with hypothesis 5, we predict a boundary condition on this effect, such that observers will not be more likely to approach a person who is wearing a conversation piece that suggests a topic they would not enjoy discussing. Second, we directly assess predicted conversation quality to determine whether it mediates the effect of the shirt on the observer’s likelihood to approach.
1.7.1 Method

Participants and Design. Three hundred and twelve participants (average age = 36 years old, 47% male) were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk to participate in this study, which had a three cell between-subjects design (t-shirt style: plain, pro-pets, anti-animal testing). Ten participants were removed from the sample for misidentifying the shirt they saw in a manipulation check, leaving 302 participants in the sample.¹

Procedure. In study 4, all participants were again asked to imagine that they were at a casual party with people whom they did not know and were looking for someone to talk to. Then they were asked to imagine that they saw a man who, depending on which condition they were in, was wearing either an appealing conversation piece shirt (n = 99), an unappealing conversation piece shirt (n = 101), or a plain shirt (n = 102). The appealing and unappealing conversation pieces were both black, branded Humane Society shirts with a paw print logo on them, but the appealing one had the pro-pet slogan, “Celebrating pets. Celebrating the people who love them,” on it and the unappealing had an anti-animal testing slogan, “Torturing one animal is cruelty. Torturing many animals is SCIENCE?” on it. A post-test (n = 90) that asked participants “How appealing do you find the topic of this shirt to be” confirmed that participants found the pro-pets shirt (M = 5.06) to be more appealing than the anti-animal testing shirt (M = 3.5; t (88) = 4.08, p < .0001). The plain shirt was solid black. All participants

¹ The direction and significance of all results is unchanged when they are included in the analyses.
then answered the questions described below in the measures section. We predicted that observers would be more likely to approach the person wearing the appealing conversation piece than the person wearing either of the other shirts and that this effect would be mediated by predicted conversation quality.

**Measures.** The primary dependent variable was likelihood to approach, which was assessed by asking “How likely would you be to approach this person to chat with him?” We measured the hypothesized mediator—predicted conversation quality—using the composite five-question variable described in Study 3 (α = .92). In addition, two additional potential mediators were assessed—predicted self-disclosure (two items; α = .49; see Appendix F for items) and the observers’ inference about why the wearer was wearing the conversation piece, “How much do you think this person wants to be approached by strangers to chat?” These mediators were included because it was possible that observers may choose to start conversations with people who are wearing conversation pieces to directly facilitate self-disclosure or that wearing a conversation piece functions as a signal that the wearer is open to conversation and so would be a good person to approach. Finally, participants answered some additional questions.

**1.7.2 Results**

**Likelihood to Approach.** The shirt affected how likely participants were to approach the person they saw. There was a main effect of shirt seen on likelihood to approach \((F(1, 299) = 13.07, p = .0004; \text{see figure 1})\). Participants were significantly more likely to
approach the person wearing the pro-pets shirt ($M = 4.98$) than the person wearing the plain shirt ($M = 4.25; F (1, 299) = 12.64, p = .0004$) or the anti-animal testing shirt ($M = 3.95; F (1, 299) = 24.68, p < .0001$). There was no difference in how likely they would be to approach the person in the plain shirt versus the anti-animal testing shirt ($F (1, 299) = 2.05, p = .15$), although the anti-animal testing shirt was directionally less likely to lead to approach.

![Effect of Shirt on Likelihood to Approach](image)

**Figure 1: Likelihood to Approach (Study 4)**

*Predicted Conversation Quality.* There was a main effect for shirt on predicted conversation quality ($F (2, 299) = 11.48, p < .0001; see figure 2). Participants thought they would have better conversations with the person in the pro-pets shirt ($M = 4.81$) than the person in the plain shirt ($M = 4.13, F (1, 299) = 16.42, p < .0001$) or the person in the anti-animal testing shirt ($M = 4.10, F (1, 299) = 18.12, p < .0001$). There was no difference in
predicted conversation quality between those who saw the person in the plain or anti-animal testing shirts (F(1, 299) = .047, p = .83).

There were significant effects of the shirt on both predicted self-disclosure (F(2, 299) = 21.96, p < .0001) and the observer’s perception of the wearer’s desire to have others approach (F(2, 299) = 21.26, p < .0001), but neither of these showed the same pattern as did predicted conversation quality and likelihood to approach. For predicted self-disclosure, participants predicted self-disclosure would be lower with the person in the plain shirt (M = 3.45) than in the pro-pets shirt (M = 4.16, F(1, 299) = 20.63, p < .0001) or the anti-animal testing shirt (M = 4.46; F(1, 299) = 41.63, p < .0001). The difference between the anti-animal testing and pro-pets shirts was marginal (F(1, 299) = 3.51, p = .06). For desire to have others approach, the plain shirt suggested the lowest level of desire to have others approach (M = 3.88), the pro-pets shirt conveyed a moderate desire (M = 4.35), and the anti-animal testing shirt showed the highest desire to have others approach (M = 5.09; all differences significant, p < .05).
Mediation Analysis. We next examine whether predicted conversation quality mediates the effect of the shirt on likelihood to approach using a multicategorical mediation model (Hayes and Preacher 2014). We also included the competing mediators of the observer’s perception of the wearer’s desire to have someone approach them and the predicted self-disclosure measure in the model. We assess two mediation models, one comparing the pro-pets shirt to the plain shirt and one comparing the pro-pets shirt to the anti-animal testing shirt.

For the pro-pets versus plain shirt model, there was a significant indirect effect of predicted conversation quality on likelihood to approach (95% CI: [.31 — .81]). When participants saw a person wearing the pro-pets shirt rather than a plain shirt, they anticipated having a better conversation with them and so were more likely to approach, (see figure 3A). Predicted self-disclosure also emerged as a significant mediator of the
effect of the shirt on likelihood to approach (95% CI: [.07-.32]) and showed the same pattern as did predicted conversation quality.

When comparing the pro-pets shirt to the anti-animal testing shirt, participants anticipated having a better conversation with the person wearing the pro-pets shirt and so were more likely to approach, (95% CI: [.29 – .87], see figure 3B). Here, predicted disclosure did not mediate this effect, likely because both conversation piece shirts led to high predicted levels of disclosure, and disclosure only increases likelihood to approach if the observer thinks that the disclosure will be of interest to them. Perceptions of the wearer’s desire to have others approach them did not mediate either of the effects.

Figure 3: Predicted Conversation Quality as a Mediator (Study 4)
Note: Unstandardized betas are reported; *Significant at the .05 level; **significant at the .01 level; ***significant at the .0001 level

1.7.3 Discussion

This study shows that conversation pieces affect observers’ predicted conversation quality, which in turn, influences their likelihood to approach, supporting hypothesis 4. It also shows that conversation pieces that do not increase predicted conversation quality do not increase likelihood to approach, supporting hypothesis 5. Together these findings provide further evidence that predicted conversation quality is a key factor in why conversation pieces affect likelihood to approach. Predicted self-disclosure only increases likelihood to approach to the extent that observers think this disclosure would be enjoyable. Furthermore, the observer’s perception of the wearer’s desire to have others approach does not appear to influence likelihood to approach, providing evidence that conversation pieces influence interactions by affecting predictions of how the conversation will go, rather than by signaling something about the wearer. In this study, the anti-animal testing shirt neither helped nor hurt interactions relative to the plain shirt. However, if a conversation piece is sufficiently objectionable, it can lead observers to think they will have worse conversations with the wearer and thus be less likely to approach. See Appendix C for an example of when this occurs.
The results of the first two studies show that observers believe that conversation pieces can influence their conversations. However, these are just predictions, and observers’ predictions of how a conversation will go are sometimes inconsistent with how the conversation actually plays out (Epley and Schroeder 2014). In studies 5-7 we examine whether and how conversation pieces actually affect conversations. In study 5 we focus on how conversation pieces influence the opening line of a conversation.

1.8 Study 5: Conversation Pieces Improve Conversation Opening Lines

In study 5 we test hypotheses 4a and 4b and the idea that conversation pieces change the opening line of the conversation, i.e., how the observer starts the conversation with the wearer. In order to not confound choice of whom to approach with the method of starting the conversation, all participants in this study were told that they were going to approach a specific person and were asked to write what they would say to start a conversation with them. We analyze these opening lines, looking at how frequently conversation pieces are mentioned in observers’ opening lines and then examining the predicted consequences of mentioning the conversation piece for the rest of the conversation. Participants rated how likely they thought their opening lines would be to lead to a good conversation, but since people are known to be inaccurate and overoptimistic at assessing their own skills (Kruger and Dunning 1999), we also had coders evaluate these opening lines.
In this study participants were again asked to take the role of the observer, but rather than choosing whether to approach a person, they were told that they were going to approach the woman shown in the photo and were asked what they would say to start a conversation with her. Depending on the condition, the woman they saw was either wearing a plain shirt or one of two conversation pieces—a shirt printed with an image of dancing figures and the words “Daybreaker Dance Party—6:00 am-10:00 am” or a shirt with just the image on it. A Daybreaker Dance Party is a sober, rave style party that takes place in the early mornings.

1.8.1 Method

Participants and Design. Three hundred and three participants (average age = 35 years old, 47% male) were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk to participate in this study. One participant was eliminated for not saying how they would start the conversation, and twelve were removed for misidentifying the shirt they saw, leaving 290 participants in the sample. This study had a three cell between-subjects design, with participants seeing a woman wearing a graphic shirt with dance figures and words (n = 98), a shirt with only dance figures (n = 92), or a plain shirt (n = 100).

Procedure. Participants were again asked to imagine that they were at a casual party and wanted to get to know new people. Then were shown a picture of a woman and told that they had decided that they wanted to start a conversation with her.

2 The direction and significance of these results are unchanged when they are included in the analyses.
Depending on which condition they were assigned to, the woman was wearing either a solid colored t-shirt, a graphic t-shirt with an ambiguous design of dancing figures on it, or a t-shirt that had the same design and said “Daybreaker Dance Party” on it (see Appendix G for pictures of the shirts). The shirt with words on it directly suggested a topic of conversation, while the shirt with just the image on it was interesting, but did not reveal anything for sure. Then participants were asked to write an opening line of conversation: “What would you say to start a conversation with this person? Please write the exact words you think you would say in the space below.” Finally, participants answered the questions described in the measures section as well as questions about their prior experience with Daybreaker Dance parties and a manipulation check.

Measures. In addition to writing opening lines of conversation, participants also indicated whether they had mentioned the woman’s shirt in their opening line. Then they answered three questions about how good they perceived their opening line to be ($\alpha = .68$; see Appendix F for the items). They also indicated their perception of the woman’s intentions for wearing the shirt: “How much do you think this person wants to be approached by strangers to chat?” At the end of the study, the participants answered some supplemental questions in which alternative ways they could have started the conversation were made more salient. These questions and the analyses performed on them can be seen in Appendix D.
Coding Procedure. As planned, two trained coders who were blind to condition coded the opening lines on a seven-point scale for how likely they would be to lead to a good conversation, lead to an in-depth conversation about the topic introduced and lead the woman to self-disclose. These were combined into a composite variable called opening line quality (coders’ αs from .94 - .98; Krippendorff’s α = .68). Word count for the responses was also calculated.

1.8.2 Results

Likelihood to Ask about Shirt. Sixty-three percent of participants who were asked to approach the woman in the shirt with words and images mentioned the shirt in their opening line, asking her about the event or about her general interest in dance. Thirty-eight percent of participants in the image only condition mentioned the shirt. Some inferred from the image that the shirt was about dance and asked her about it, while others asked what the design on her shirt was. Only 7% of participants in the plain shirt condition mentioned the shirt in their opening line (generally referring to its color). These percentages are all significantly different from each other (χ² = 68.40, p < .0001), supporting hypothesis 6b (see figure 4).
Opening Line Quality. The coders rated that opening lines about the shirt as “better,” i.e., more likely to lead to good, deep conversations ($M_{\text{ShirtMention}} = 4.48$) than were opening lines that did not mention the shirt ($M_{\text{NoShirtMention}} = 2.72$, $t(288) = 18.33$, $p < .0001$). Since opening lines that mentioned the shirt were more common when participants saw one of the graphic shirts, there was also a significant main effect of shirt type on opening line quality ($F(2, 287) = 28.56$, $p < .0001$). The more information was revealed on the shirt, the better the opening line was ($M_{\text{Plain}} = 2.86$, $M_{\text{ImageOnly}} = 3.23$, $M_{\text{WordsAndImage}} = 3.97$, all $ps < .03$). These main effects were moderated by an interaction ($F(2, 284) = 17.31$, $p < .0001$). Mentioning the shirt improved opening line quality in both the image only ($M_{\text{ShirtMention}} = 4.20$, $M_{\text{NoShirtMention}} = 2.63$; $F(1, 284) = 98.60$, $p < .0001$) and words and images conditions ($M_{\text{ShirtMention}} = 4.79$, $M_{\text{NoShirtMention}} = 2.57$; $F(1, 284) = 207.05$, $p < .0001$), but did not improve opening line quality when participants saw the woman in
the plain shirt ($M_{\text{ShirtMention}} = 3.17, M_{\text{NoShirtMention}} = 2.84; F(1, 284) = 1.3, p = .26$, see figure 5).

Within participants who mentioned one of the two conversation piece shirts, mentioning the words and images shirt led to better opening lines than did mentioning the one with just images on it ($F(1, 284) = 14.33, p = .0002$). The significance of these results is unchanged if word count is included as a covariate in the analyses, and the interaction is not significant when word count is treated as the dependent variable.

Results for participants’ own ratings of their opening line quality showed a similar, but more flattened pattern. Mentioning the shirt again led to significantly better opening lines than not mentioning the shirt ($M_{\text{ShirtMention}} = 5.01, M_{\text{NoShirtMention}} = 4.51, t(288) = 3.58, p = .0004$), and there was again a main effect for shirt type ($M_{\text{Plain}} = 4.42, M_{\text{ImageOnly}} = 4.66, M_{\text{WordsAndImage}} = 4.99, F(2, 287) = 6.32, p = .002$), although the pairwise comparison between the plain shirt and image only shirt was non-significant ($p = .14$). However, while the overall pattern was the same, the interaction did not approach significance ($F(2, 284) = .30, p = .74$). An examination of the means shows that participants overall rated their own opening lines as better than did coders, especially their opening lines that did not mention the shirt. This is a pattern that would be predicted by the overconfidence bias, and we return to this point in the general discussion.
Overall this pattern of results suggests that observers frequently start conversations by asking about people’s conversation pieces and that starting a conversation by using a conversation piece is a good opening line. The effect of the conversation piece is much larger for the coder’s ratings than for the participants’ own ratings of their opening lines. This is consistent with the overconfidence bias, but may also be due in part to the fact that participants evaluate their own opening line without comparing it to other potential opening lines the way the coders could. Two additional analyses to test for this possibility, which can be seen in Appendix D, provide evidence that the participants’ results look more like the coders’ when alternative opening lines are made more salient to the participants.
1.9 Study 6: Field Experiment

The prior studies show that conversation pieces affect observers’ predictions of conversation quality and that opening lines inspired by conversation pieces influence predictions of how good the resulting conversation will be, but we have not yet examined whether conversation pieces influence actual, complete conversations. We address this question in study 6. The experience of having a conversation with another person cannot be captured by a hypothetical scenario, so we investigate this question using a field study in which participants had a real in-person conversation with a stranger or acquaintance as they went about their daily lives and then evaluated the conversation and person with whom they talked.

In this study, participants were asked to approach and have a brief conversation with a stranger or distant acquaintance who was wearing either a graphic t-shirt that revealed something about its wearer’s interests or experiences or a plain t-shirt. In order to not force people to talk about conversation pieces that they would not normally mention and to see how people naturally start conversations, participants were not told to mention the shirt to start the conversation, but were allowed to start however they liked. However, we did include an additional control condition in which participants approached someone in a graphic t-shirt, but were explicitly told not to bring up the shirt in the conversation (referred to as the “No Ask” condition). Including this condition enabled us to isolate the effect of talking about the t-shirt: If conversation
pieces exert their positive effects over conversations by changing the topic of the conversation, rather than by enabling participants to select people with, for example, certain personality characteristics (as people who choose to wear conversation piece shirts may be different from those who choose to wear plain shirts), then participants in this condition should not have better conversations than those participants who approached people wearing plain shirts. We expected that participants who were instructed to approach people who were wearing conversation pieces and were allowed to mention them would have better conversations than would those who could not use a conversation piece to help the conversation, either because they were told not to or because they were asked to approach a person in a plain shirt.

1.9.1 Method

*Participants and Design.* One hundred and ninety-six participants at a medium sized university in the Southeast, recruited in two waves that occurred approximately one month apart, completed the online pretest for this study. There were minor differences between the waves (see Appendix E for details), but these did not affect the results. Of the participants who completed the pretest, 165 completed the follow up survey, for a completion rate of 84%.

Of these participants three were eliminated for completing the study in both wave one and two, and eleven were eliminated for

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3 Dropouts were younger ($M_{\text{Dropout}} = 19.37$, $M_{\text{Complete}} = 20.02$, $t(194) = 2.03$, $p = .04$) and less conscientious ($M_{\text{Dropout}} = 3.35$, $M_{\text{Complete}} = 3.67$, $t(194) = 2.03$, $p = .04$) than were participants who stayed in the study, but they did not differ on any of the theoretically relevant variables, such as assigned condition.
behaving as if they were in a different condition of the study than they were assigned (e.g., talking about the shirt when they were in the No Ask condition), leaving a final sample of 151 participants (29% male and average age = 20 years old).\(^4\)

This study had a three cell (conversation piece vs. no ask vs. control) between-subjects design, with whom participants were asked to approach and what they were allowed to talk about varying between conditions. Participants in the “conversation piece” condition (n = 55) were asked to approach someone in a shirt that they “think might say something about who they (the wearer) are—for example, a t-shirt from a band or musical group, a t-shirt with a quote from a TV show or movie on it, or a shirt that communicates their sense of humor” and to start the conversation however they would like. Participants in the “no ask” condition (n = 51) were instructed to approach a person wearing the same type of shirt but were explicitly told to not bring up the shirt in the conversation. Participants in the control condition (n = 45) were asked to approach someone wearing a plain t-shirt and begin the conversation however they would like.

Procedure. Participants who signed up for the study first completed an online pretest to confirm that they were still interested in the study. Participants who completed the pretest were assigned to one of the three conditions described earlier: conversation piece, no ask, or control. Then all participants received an e-mail with

\(^4\) The direction of all of the effects are unchanged if these participants are left in the sample, but two of the eight pairwise comparisons in the condition wise analysis become marginal, and one of the seven comparisons in the analysis by shirt mention becomes non-significant. See Appendix E for details.
instructions for completing the rest of the study. All participants were instructed to approach a same-sex stranger or distant acquaintance and start a conversation with them. They were asked to talk for at least two minutes and to not have a purely “functional” conversation like ordering food or doing group work. Whom they were asked to approach varied by condition, as described above. The day after receiving this e-mail, they received an e-mail with a link to a follow up survey, which assessed their conversation.

Measures. The follow up survey contained a number of questions about the conversation they had. Participants indicated whether the topic of the shirt came up in the conversation to enable us to determine how frequently people use conversation pieces in conversations and to distinguish conversations that involved the conversation piece from those that did not.

They also answered questions about self-disclosure in the conversation. Participants were asked to list each topic that they discussed in the conversation in the order they discussed it and rate how deeply they discussed it on a one to seven scale. We then looked at disclosure on the early topics to assess fast tracking (see details below) and averaged the depth of disclosure on all topics to get an overall disclosure measure. Participants also answered questions about how deeply they shared with their partner during the conversation and how deeply their partner shared with them on specific topics. Not surprisingly, given the highly reciprocal nature of disclosure (Cozby
1972), these measures were highly correlated, so we combined both perspectives into a single composite variable for each topic. We assessed how deeply they discussed preferences (α = .65), biographical facts (α = .84), previous experiences (α = .75), emotions generally (α = .73), and specifically positive and negative (reverse coded) topics (α = .79).

Participants then answered questions about the experience of having the conversation. A factor analysis showed that these questions broke down into two factors, one assessing how smooth the conversation was (conversational smoothness; four items; α = .81, e.g., “How easy was having this conversation for you?”; see Appendix F for items) and one how good the conversation was (perceived conversation quality; six items; α = .82, e.g., “How enjoyable did the conversation feel to you?”; see Appendix F for items). We also assessed liking for their conversation partner (“How much do you like the person you talked to?”) and how well they knew the person they approached before talking to them. Finally, they answered some additional questions about the conversation as well as some individual difference measures, which are not discussed here.

1.9.2 Results

Shirt Mentions. There are a variety of different questions of interest in this study. We were first interested in whether these field study participants would spontaneously mention the shirts. We found that when participants were asked to approach someone in a conversation piece and not given any instructions about how to start the
conversation, forty-two, or seventy-six percent of them, mentioned the shirt in some way. While the instructions about whom to approach obviously made participants more sensitive to the shirt, only two, or 4% of participants who were asked to approach someone in a plain shirt, mentioned the shirt ($\chi^2(1) = 83.61, p < .0001$). This replicates the results from the earlier hypothetical studies, showing that shirts that suggest a topic of conversation are particularly likely to be mentioned in conversation, supporting hypothesis 6b.

Of the conversations that did not mention the topic of the shirt ($n = 104$), eleven of them actually included other spontaneous product mentions, e.g., comments about a hat or ring or what the person was purchasing, providing additional support for hypothesis 6a. These spontaneous responses provide further evidence that consumers naturally use products to start conversations.

The main question of interest is whether conversations that involve conversation pieces are better than are those that do not. We answer this question by analyzing the data in two different ways: by assigned condition and then by whether or not the shirt is mentioned. Neither way perfectly captures the answer to this question, but they are broadly consistent with each other and together provide a more complete understanding of the results.

Analysis by Condition. The first analysis compares participants’ responses based on the condition to which they were originally assigned. There was a main effect of
condition on conversation depth ($F(2, 148) = 4.31, p = .015$). Conversations in the conversation piece condition ($M_{CP} = 3.84$) were significantly deeper than conversations in the no ask condition ($M_{NoAsk} = 3.30; F(1, 148) = 8.01, p = .005$), or the control condition ($M_{Control} = 3.42; F(1, 148) = 4.55, p = .03$), supporting hypothesis 7a. They were also significantly more positive ($M_{CP} = 3.72$) than those in the no ask ($M_{NoAsk} = 3.23; F(1, 148) = 13.52, p = .0003$) or control ($M_{Control} = 3.36; F(1, 148) = 6.64, p = .01$) conditions ($F(2, 148) = 7.24, p = .001$). There were no significant differences in the degree to which preferences, personally relevant experiences, emotions, or biographical facts were shared ($ps > .1$).

We also looked for evidence of fast tracking, or higher levels of early self-disclosure in this study. Given that different participants talked about different numbers of topics (range from 1-8, average = 4) in the conversation, “early” in the conversation was defined differently for different participants. For participants who discussed 1, 2, or 3 topics (44% of participants), we looked at the first topic they discussed, and for participants who discussed 4-8 topics (56% of participants), we looked at the average of the first two topics discussed. We found a significant main effect for condition ($F(2, 148) = 6.16, p = .003$), such that participants discussed early topic(s) more deeply in the conversation piece condition ($M = 3.85$) than in the no ask ($M = 3.21; F(1, 148) = 7.50, p = .007$) or control conditions ($M = 3.07; F(1, 148) = 10.35, p = .002$), supporting hypothesis
b. There were no significant differences in how deeply later topics were discussed, showing that conversation pieces do not necessarily lead to deeper disclosure at the end of the conversation, but they enable people to skip the typical low depth introductory phase.

We then examined the effect of condition on perceived conversation quality. There was a main effect of condition ($F(2, 148) = 3.46, p = .03$), such that participants who could mention their partner’s conversation piece had significantly better conversations ($M_{CP} = 4.54$) than did those who were not allowed to mention the conversation piece ($M_{NoAsk} = 4.12; F (1, 148) = 6.47, p = .01$) and marginally better ones than did people in the control condition ($M_{Control} = 4.24; F (1, 148) = 3.15, p = .08$), providing some support for hypothesis 8. Their conversations did not differ in smoothness ($F (2, 148) = .47, p = .63$). The main effect for condition on liking was non-significant ($F (2, 148) = 2.29, p = .11$), but participants in the conversation piece condition ($M = 5.40$) liked their partners significantly better than did participants in the no ask condition ($M = 5.01; F (1, 148) = 4.55, p = .03$). The control condition fell between them and was not significantly different from either.

**Analysis by Shirt Mention.** The first analysis shows that being assigned to the condition allowing participants to talk about a conversation piece changes the resulting

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These results are replicated if just the first topic is examined for all participants ($F (2, 148) = 5.61, p = .005$): Participants talked about the first topic in more depth in the conversation piece condition ($M = 3.80$) than they did in the no ask condition ($M = 3.12; F (1, 148) = 6.21, p = .01$) or the control condition ($M = 2.91; F (1, 148) = 9.85, p = .002$).
conversations. However, participants in the conversation piece condition were not forced to talk about the t-shirt, and so not all of them did. Therefore, this analysis does not directly answer the primary question in this study, namely whether people who have conversations that mention conversation pieces actually have better conversations than those who do not. To answer this question more directly, we also conducted a second analysis of the data in which participants who had conversations about the content of the t-shirt are compared to those whose conversations did not mention the t-shirt, regardless of condition. Pooled across all of the conditions, forty-seven conversations (31%) mentioned the shirt and one hundred and four (69%) did not.

In this analysis we again first looked at how conversation pieces influenced self-disclosure. Conversations that mentioned the topic of the t-shirt were deeper ($M_{Shirt} = 3.82, M_{NoShirt} = 3.4, t (149) = 2.38, p = .02$) and more positive ($M_{Shirt} = 3.82, M_{NoShirt} = 3.28, t (149) = 4.62, p < .0001$) than those that did not, conceptually replicating the conversational benefit of conversation pieces found in the condition-wise analysis and providing further support for hypothesis 7a. In this analysis a significant effect of conversation pieces emerged for sharing preferences as well. Conversations that mentioned the conversation piece led to more sharing of preferences ($M_{Shirt} = 3.39, M_{NoShirt} = 3.02, t (149) = 2.25, p = .03$) than those that did not. Again there were no differences in the degree to which personally relevant experiences, emotions, or biographical facts were shared. As in the previous analysis, we looked at fast tracking by dividing topics
into early and late topics on the basis of how many topics each participant talked about. Again we found that participants who mentioned the conversation piece discussed early topic(s) in more depth than did people who did not mention the conversation piece \( (t (149) = 2.22, p = .028) \), supporting hypothesis 7b.\(^6\) Again, there was no difference in how deeply the later topics were discussed.

There was also a significant effect of shirt topic mention on predicted conversation quality; conversations that mentioned the shirt were considered to be better than those that did not \( (M_{\text{Shirt}} = 4.57, M_{\text{NoShirt}} = 4.20, t (149) = 2.5, p = .01) \), further supporting hypothesis 8. Again there was no result for smoothness \( (t (149) = .44, p = .66) \).

In addition, there was a significant effect of talking about the topic of the shirt on how much participants liked their partners. Participants reported liking the person they talked to more when they talked about the topic of the shirt than when they did not \( (M_{\text{Shirt}} = 5.47, M_{\text{NoShirt}} = 5.12, t (149) = 2.24, p = .03) \), supporting hypothesis 9. This finding is especially impressive in light of the fact that participants mentioned the shirt when they were talking with people whom they knew less well \( (M_{\text{Shirt}} = 1.38, M_{\text{NoShirt}} = 1.64, t (149) = 1.95, p = .05) \), perhaps using it as a sort of crutch for difficult conversations. There were no other differences in attitude toward the person before the conversation started. This again suggests that the benefits of a conversation that mentions the t-shirt are the result

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\(^6\) This effect was marginal when examining just the first topic \( (t (149) = 1.67, p = .098) \).
of what occurred in the conversation rather than differences in attitude toward the person going into the conversation.

1.9.3 Discussion

The converging evidence from two different analytical approaches to the data in study 6 shows that conversation pieces positively influence actual conversations between strangers in a natural environment. In addition to finding positive benefits for talking about conversation pieces, this study also casts doubt on an alternative explanation of how conversation pieces may increase conversation quality and liking—by enabling observers to identify and select people with whom they are more likely to get along. We find that participants mentioned the shirt when they were talking with people they knew less well ($M_{shirt} = 1.38, M_{NoShirt} = 1.64; t(149) = 1.95, p = .05$) and that there were no differences in pre-conversation estimates of similarity, suggesting that observers did not use conversation pieces to identify people to whom they were similar. Further corroborating this evidence is the consistent finding from the condition-wise analysis that there were no benefits to approaching someone wearing a conversation piece, but not being allowed to mention it. Together these results provide evidence that the benefits from approaching someone wearing a conversation piece stem from how observers can use it to change the conversation, not from observers using it to approach a different type of person.
1.10 Study 7: How a Conversation Piece Changes Conversation

Study 6 shows that starting a conversation by asking about a conversation piece can increase self-disclosure and improve the quality of the conversation. However, unlike the other studies in this paper, it did not look at conversations that occurred strictly in a relationship initiation context, and we were not able to record the conversations that occurred (due to logistic and consent issues regarding the chosen conversation partner), so we could not capture exactly what was said when. This limits our ability to truly measure fast tracking, and we had to rely on participants’ memories of when information was revealed in the conversation and conversations were of different (and unknown) lengths.

In order to address these concerns and better test hypothesis 7b, in study 7 we look at how conversation pieces influence the timing of disclosures in conversations in a significantly more controlled way. Using a design similar to McGraw, Warren, and Kan (2014)’s study 4 design, we conducted a three-part study in which one set of participants generated a large corpus of hypothetical conversations, a second set of participants rated these conversations to enable us to identify matched conversations to use as stimuli in the final phase of the study, and a third set of participants compared the matched conversations. While this controlled design involving a third party evaluating a hypothetical conversation limits our ability to examine how talking about a conversation piece changes the emotional experience of a conversation, it enables us to determine
with precision how starting a conversation by asking about a conversation piece affects people’s perceptions regarding the content and timing of conversational disclosures.

1.10.1 Method

Phase One. In the first phase of the study, thirty Amazon Mechanical Turk participants (53% male, average age = 32 years old) each generated two sample “conversations” for potential use as stimuli in the later phases. One of the conversations was written in response to a stranger starting the conversation by asking them about a t-shirt that reflected an interest or a location to which they had traveled, and one of the conversations was written in response to a stranger starting the conversation without mentioning the conversation piece. To generate these scenarios, all participants first wrote down a location to which they had traveled and an interest that they had. Then they read two versions of a scenario. In both scenarios, they were asked to imagine that they were at a casual party where they did not know many people and that they were wearing their “favorite pants, a pair of comfortable shoes, and a t-shirt about (interest/location).” The interests/locations reflected on the t-shirts were personalized using the “pipe text” feature of Qualtrics so that each participant imagined wearing a shirt that reflected their own experiences.

In the conversation piece version of the scenario, participants were asked to imagine that they were wearing a shirt that reflected either their interest or a location and a stranger came up to them and said “Hey how’s it going? I’m Alex, what’s your
name? So do you like (interest or location that is on the participant’s shirt)?” Then participants were asked to extend the conversation—to write what they would say if someone started a conversation with them in this way, what they imagined the other person would say in response, then what they would say in response, and so forth until they had written ten additional lines of dialogue (see Appendix G for a sample of a completed conversation).

The control version of the study was identical to the experimental condition, but participants were asked to imagine that they were wearing a shirt that reflected their other response (an interest, if in the product conversation version they were wearing a location shirt or vice versa) and the stranger started the conversation by asking if they were enjoying the party (i.e., “Hey how’s it going? I’m Alex, what’s your name? Are you enjoying the party?”). This control condition was chosen on the basis of the results of study 5. It may seem that there are a nearly infinite number of ways to start a conversation with someone at a party. However, in study 5, when participants were asked to start a conversation with the person in one of the two conversation pieces, 51% of participants chose to start the conversation by mentioning the shirt, and 39% chose to start with some variation or subset of the information included in “Hey, how’s it going? Are you enjoying the party?”, so this is a reasonable opening control line.

All participants wrote two conversations, one in response to each of the opening lines. The order in which participants wrote the conversations and whether participants
were asked about the interest t-shirt or travel t-shirt in each condition was counterbalanced across participants.

Phase 2. We wanted to isolate the effect of conversation pieces on conversations, so in phase two we identified pairs of conversations that were evenly matched in terms of most features of the conversation but differed in how central the conversation piece was to the conversation. A second set of Amazon Mechanical Turk participants (n = 302, 67% male, average age = 32) evaluated slightly cleaned-up versions of the conversations the phase 1 participants generated. Six conversations that mentioned illegal activities, blatant racism/sexism, or in which the participant lost track of who was talking were also removed from the consideration set for a total of fifty-four conversations to be evaluated. Participants evaluated the conversations for realism, unusualness, tone (positive-negative), equality of “speaking time” between the two speakers, and how important the conversation piece was to the conversation. We also calculated word count for each conversation. Each participant read eight randomly selected conversations, resulting in a total of about forty ratings for each conversation.

On the basis of these ratings, two pairs of conversations were identified—one pair in which the participant was wearing a location t-shirt and one pair in which the participant was wearing an interest shirt. These conversations were selected on the basis

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Conversations were reformatted for easy reading and standardized for grammar and spelling errors so that these would not unduly influence ratings.
of being high in realism, very similar on the other control variables, and significantly
different in how important the topic of the shirt was to the conversation (see table 3).
Choosing conversations that are matched on so many things (particularly tone, since in
study 6 conversation pieces led to more positive conversations) limits differences
between conversations, but helps to ensure that any differences are due to the
importance of the conversation piece to the conversation rather than other factors.

Table 4: Mean Ratings of Chosen Conversations on Shirt Focus and Other
Measures

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<th>Importance of Shirt</th>
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<th>Unusual</th>
<th>Tone</th>
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<td>5.7</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Shirt Focus</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Phase 3. In the final phase of the study, a third set of Amazon Mechanical Turk
participants (n = 202, 54% male, average age = 34 years old) evaluated the four selected
conversations. The study had a mixed design with the centrality of the shirt to the
conversation (high centrality “conversation piece conversation” vs. low centrality
“control conversation”) varying within subjects, and the topic of the shirt (hobby v.
travel) varying between subjects. Each participant evaluated a conversation piece
conversation and a control conversation in a random order. Conversations used gender-
neutral names to control for gender effects.
Measures. The primary goal of this study was to provide firmer evidence that conversation pieces fast tracked self-disclosure. As in study 6, we looked at fast tracking by topic, having participants separate out the conversation into topics and then evaluate the level of self-disclosure for each topic. However, in this study we were also able to look at fast tracking more precisely, looking at how deep the level of disclosure was on each line of the conversation. In this study, all conversations are eleven lines long, so we can determine more precisely whether disclosures occur earlier in one conversation than they do in another. We predicted that early self-disclosure would be higher for conversation piece than control conversations.

Participants also rated how deeply preferences and opinions (α = .87), facts, emotions, interests, and attitudes were discussed in the conversation. In addition, they answered other questions about perceived conversation quality and the relationship between the speakers, but these variables were not affected by the manipulation and are not discussed further. The lack of an effect on these more affective variables is likely because the conversations were matched on positivity, which we found in study 6 covaried with enjoyment and liking, and because it is hard for outside observers to assess these variables without actually experiencing the conversation.

1.10.2 Results

Fast Tracking Disclosure. The primary question of interest in this study was whether conversation pieces fast tracked disclosure. We addressed this question by
looking both at disclosure by topic and disclosure by line. For the topic based analysis of fast tracking, we replicated the results of study 6, finding that the first topic was discussed in substantially more depth in the conversation piece conversation than in the control conversation ($F(1, 199) = 95.12, p < .0001$) for both the interest condition ($M_{CP} = 4.08, M_{Control} = 2.85; F(1, 199) = 51.04, p < .0001$) and the location condition ($M_{CP} = 3.94, M_{Control} = 2.80; F(1, 199) = 44.18, p < .0001; p_{Interaction} = .71$).

Similarly, for the line by line analysis of fast tracking, there was a main effect for depth of disclosure on the first participant-generated line of the conversation ($F(1, 200) = 38.14, p < .0001$) and no interaction by topic ($p = .43$). For both the interest condition ($M_{CP} = 4.24, M_{Control} = 3.53; F(1, 200) = 24.23, p < .0001$) and the location condition ($M_{CP} = 4.15, M_{Control} = 3.6; F(1, 200) = 14.54, p = .0002$), the disclosure was deeper for the first line of the conversation piece conversation than for the control conversation. There were no main effects for level of disclosure in the later lines, again suggesting that starting the conversation by asking about the conversation piece enabled participants to skip the low disclosure introductory phase of the conversation, but did not lead to very deep disclosures. Together these results support hypothesis 7b.

In addition, in these fixed length conversations, participants talked about fewer unique topics over the course of their ten-line conversation in the conversation piece condition than in the control condition ($F(1, 200) = 222.05, p < .0001$). There was an interaction by topic ($F(1, 200) = 3.83, p = .05$), but the simple main effect is highly
significant in both the interest ($M_{CP} = 2.41, M_{Control} = 4.02; F(1, 200) = 83.77, p < .0001$) and the location condition ($M_{CP} = 2.4, M_{Control} = 4.5; F(1, 200) = 142.10, p < .0001$). If the length of the conversation is unconstrained (as in study 6), this pattern may not emerge, because the speakers can talk for more time and about more topics if they are having a good conversation. This study suggests, however, that conversation pieces help people to find a good topic immediately rather than having to try multiple topics before finding one they can discuss in depth.

Disclosure Topics. While the primary focus on this study was to examine fast tracking, we also looked at other differences between the two conversations. Given that the stimuli were matched in terms of many of the factors that affect perceived conversation quality few differences were expected. As in study 6 we looked at the degree to which talking about the shirt influenced the disclosure of preferences and opinions, personally relevant experiences, emotions, and biographical facts. Replicating the results of Study 6, talking about the shirt led to more disclosure of preferences ($F(1, 200) = 182.46, p < .0001$) with no interaction ($p = .38$). The simple main effect was significant for both interest ($M_{CP} = 4.67, M_{Control} = 3.25; F(1, 200) = 79.70, p < .0001$) and location ($M_{CP} = 4.33, M_{Control} = 2.71; F(1, 200) = 103.47, p < .0001$). As in study 6, there were no consistent differences in the degree to which personally relevant experiences, emotions, or biographical facts were shared. All results discussed emerge for both the conversations in which the person was wearing a travel shirt or a hobby shirt, showing
they are not just artifacts of the particular conversation sets that we chose, but instead reflective of a general pattern of differences between conversations that mention conversation pieces and ones that do not.

1.10.3 Discussion

Study 7 shows that when conversations are started by asking about a conversation piece, self-disclosure comes earlier in the conversation and some of the content that is discussed in the conversation is changed. The tightly controlled design enabled us to precisely isolate the effect of starting a conversation by asking about conversation pieces and to examine how conversation pieces positively affect conversations.

1.11 General Discussion

Overall these studies show that conversation pieces can have a positive impact on consumers’ ability to start conversations with strangers and have good interactions with them. We find that observers are more likely to approach strangers who are displaying conversation pieces than those who are not as long as they think they could use these products to start a good conversation. In addition, starting a conversation by asking about a conversation piece changes the timing and content of self-disclosure in a conversation and can improve perceived conversation quality. Conversation pieces are, of course, not the only way that consumers start conversations, but they appear to be an
important technique in their arsenal and are the first such concrete strategy using products in the relationship initiation process to be studied in depth.

1.11.1 Theoretical Contributions

The present research makes a number of theoretical contributions to our understanding of the role products play in consumers’ lives. It introduces the construct of a conversation piece to the academic literature and provides an in depth look at what features make a product a conversation piece, different types of conversation pieces, and how conversation pieces influence people’s social interactions. Much of the previous research on the social uses of products has examined how consumers use products to manage their own cognitive or affective states, e.g., to feel unique or successful or as substitutes for interpersonal interactions. However, there is an increasing understanding that we must take a deeper look at how interpersonal motives influence consumer’s behaviors and choices (Leary, Raimi, Jongman-Sereno, and Diebels 2015). The present research does this by examining how consumers use products to help them structure their social interactions rather than just using them to fulfill their intrapersonal needs. By showing how products influence to whom consumers talk and how they talk to them, these studies show a more complete picture of the role products play in consumer’s lives.

These studies also add to our currently limited understanding of how people initiate relationships with each other. Examining the role that products play in this
process provides us with some insight about how the first conversation between two strangers occurs and suggests factors beyond proximity that influence with whom people form relationships. This work also contributes to our understanding of word of mouth, showing that a consumer’s desire to meet new people may lead to increased numbers of conversations about products and that word of mouth may impact relationships between people in addition to attitudes toward the product or firm.

1.11.2 Directions for Future Research

One interesting question is the role that similarity plays in how conversation pieces enable people to connect with each other. Conversation pieces can certainly reveal latent similarities between people and enable observers to identify people who are similar to themselves. For example, two strangers may only realize that they attended the same university if one of them is wearing a conversation piece from their mutual alma mater. Given the research showing that people are attracted to those who they perceive to be similar to themselves (Montoya et al. 2008), this likely increases both conversation likelihood and quality. However, we think that conversation pieces can have a positive effect on conversation likelihood and quality even if they do not reveal a similarity between the owner and the observer. People are capable of having enjoyable conversations and forming relationships with people from whom they differ (Sunnafrank and Miller 1981). For example, in study 3, both people who had and had not been to Yellowstone were more likely to approach the person in the Yellowstone
shirt than the plain shirt. Ninety-one percent of participants in study 5 had never heard of a Daybreaker Dance Party, but they still frequently chose to mention it in conversation, and when they did so, were able to generate good opening lines. More research is needed on the role of similarity in why conversation pieces positively impact conversations, but our current results suggest that similarity between the owner and the observer is not necessary for a conversation piece to increase approach and conversation quality.

This dissertation has examined a number of ways that products can help consumers to connect with others. However, this is a large, rich area and there are a variety of other topics that are also worth investigating. This paper focuses on the observer’s perspective on conversation pieces. Although it touches on the owner’s perspective in the pre-studies and descriptive work, there are many more questions that can be investigated from the perspective of the owner. For example, we show that conversation pieces help observers to structure their social interactions, but how do they affect social interactions from the perspective of the owner? How conscious are owners that they are displaying conversation pieces to help them achieve their social goals? Would a conversation piece intervention be effective at helping people who struggle in social interactions?

This research examines products that are universally appealing or unappealing to most people. However, there are other products for which observer reactions are
likely to be more varied. For example, products suggesting membership in a political party or other controversial beliefs likely elicit very different reactions from observers who agree with these beliefs than from those who disagree. Future research could examine how observers respond to products that express things with which they agree or disagree, but it may be more fruitful to look into this issue from the owner’s perspective, examining why some consumers wear deliberately controversial products. Owners may display deliberately controversial products with the assumption that their “type” of people—those with whom they are likely to get along—will be attracted by the product, and the people who are repelled are those who they are not likely to get along with well in any case, thus serving a screening function. Some consumers may be willing to sacrifice the number of interactions they have with others in order to ensure that the interactions they do have are with people with whom they are likely to get along well.

Impact of Conversations on Attitude toward the Conversation Piece. Firms whose products are potential conversation pieces might like to know how these product-facilitated conversations would influence consumers’ attitudes toward their product and brand. Talking about products has been previously found to influence the speaker’s and listener’s attitude toward the product (Berger 2014; Moore 2012), so it is likely that conversations started by conversation pieces might influence attitudes toward the product. If the conversation is positive, using a product to facilitate self-disclosure should generally improve consumer’s attitude toward the product or brand. The
controversial products described above may lead to unpleasant interactions that
negatively influence the owner’s attitude toward the product, but given that getting into
a public confrontation with a stranger over something they are wearing is not generally
socially acceptable behavior, it is unlikely that all but the most controversial
conversation pieces will produce large numbers of negative interactions.

Role of Conversation Pieces in Ongoing Relationships. Conversations can be difficult
even among people who already know each other quite well (Turkle 2015). Products
might play an important role in later stages of relationship development as well. For
example, imagine colleagues who have already discussed the standard introductory
topics of conversation, such as where they are from, but do not know enough about each
other to dive into another topic. If one of them is wearing or using a product that
suggests a different topic of conversation, they can talk about that and the awkwardness
of being in the elevator together or waiting for a meeting to start will be lessened. Even
close others may benefit from being able to use products as memory cues to ask people
about recent experiences or other topics of interest. If a person goes on vacation and
wants to tell their friends about it, wearing a souvenir shirt may be a subtle, but effective
way, way to jog people’s memory about the vacation and get them to initiate a
conversation on the topic. Sharing positive experiences is bonding for close others (Reis
et al. 2010), so this would likely be beneficial for the long-term health of the relationship.
Role of Conversation Pieces in Sales. The variables that have been examined in these studies, such as conversation quality and liking, are also important in the sales context. This research suggests that salespeople may be able to ingratiate themselves to their customers by commenting on the products that they are publically displaying. For example, if a customer walks into the store with a golf shirt on, commenting on the product or interest may be an effective way to start a conversation and potentially make a connection and sale with them. Salespeople may also consider wearing products themselves as a way to connect with customers. Wearing a conversation piece may make a salesperson seem more approachable or reduce awkwardness in customer-salespersons interactions. Our research also suggests that while salespeople should not use products that are off-putting to consumers, the product does not have to be a perfect match with the customers’ interests in order to be an effective conversation starter and social connector. Of course there are many differences between the sales and friendship formation contexts, including the possibility that a salesperson wearing or commenting on a conversation piece may be seen as manipulative by the customer and thus backfire, but the parallels between the situations offer intriguing opportunities.

This paper has examined how people use products to facilitate social interactions and connect with others. In particular, it has focused on understanding how consumers can use products to initiate interactions with strangers and to facilitate self-disclosure to have enjoyable and potentially relationship building connections with others. This area
of investigation in a rich one that generates new insights for researchers, consumers, and marketers about the role that products play in people’s social connections and how people can use products to help them to get to know new people and increase their happiness and well-being.
Appendix A: Pre-studies

In order for observers to respond to conversation pieces that other consumers are wearing, people need to be actually wearing conversation pieces. Therefore, before examining the observers’ perspective in depth, we first conducted two pre-studies to determine what types of wearable products consumers consider to be conversation pieces and when they wear them. We use the information from the pre-studies to guide development of our stimuli for Studies 3-7.

Pre-study 1: What are Conversation Pieces and When Do Consumers Use Them?

Pre-study 1 looks at what wearable conversation pieces consumers own and when they are likely to wear them. Participants were first asked to think of a wearable conversation piece that they owned that they would wear to a casual party. Then they read a description of a casual party and their social goals for it and indicated how likely they would be to wear their conversation piece. We predicted that consumers would be more likely to wear a conversation piece when they want to meet new people than when they wanted to spend time with friends.

Participants and Procedure. One hundred and ninety-nine participants (average age = 35 years old, 53% male) were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk to participate in this study. The study had 2 (people at party: friends or new people) x 2 (goal to talk with people at the party vs. no goal for party) between-subjects design. Twelve participants were eliminated for misidentifying who would be at the party
(friends or new people) and two additional participants were eliminated for misidentifying what their goal for the party was, leaving 185 in the remaining sample.\textsuperscript{8}

All participants were first asked to think of a conversation piece that they owned that they would wear to a casual party. A conversation piece was described as “an object that produces questions or interest from others—literally one that encourages conversations.” Then they read a brief scenario about a casual party, were told that either mostly friends or mostly strangers would be attending, and were either explicitly given a goal to talk to the people at the party or not given this goal. Then they were asked how likely they were to wear the conversation piece they had previously described to this party. Participants also answered nine questions measuring the conversational value of their conversation piece. These questions assessed both the likelihood that others would mention their conversation piece (e.g., “How likely is it that the people at the party would comment or ask you about your conversation piece?”) and how good a conversation about their conversation piece would be (e.g., “How easy would a conversation about your conversation piece with the people at the party be?”). These nine questions were combined into one composite measure assessing the conversational value of their conversation piece ($\alpha = .90$; see Appendix F for all questions). They then answered two manipulation checks: “Who did the instructions say

\textsuperscript{8} The results are directionally unchanged if these participant are included although the interaction effect becomes marginal ($p = .06$).
were most of the people who were attending the party?” and “What did the instructions state your goal for the party was?”.

Results and Discussion. In this study participants were allowed to report any type of conversation pieces they owned, allowing us to see what types of products consumers consider to be conversation pieces. Shirts (20%) and necklaces (23%) emerged as the most common categories of conversation pieces. Most items that were mentioned were products that could suggest a specific topic of conversation. For example, some participants described band t-shirts, which suggest that band or genre of music as a potential conversation topic, whereas others mentioned sports jerseys or hats, old or unusual watches, or unique necklaces, rings, or bracelets.

There was a significant interaction between the type of people at the party and participants’ goal on how likely participants were to wear their conversation pieces ($F(1, 181) = 3.94, p = .049$). When participants were given the goal to talk to the people at the party, they were significantly more likely to wear their conversation piece when they were told that mostly new people ($n = 46; M_{\text{NewPeople}} = 5.43$) rather than friends would be attending the party ($n = 46; M_{\text{Friends}} = 4.65, F(1, 181) = 4.11, p = .044$). When participants were not given an explicit goal to talk with people at the party, the composition of party guests (new people versus friends) did not affect how likely they were to wear their conversation piece ($n_{\text{NewPeople}} = 43; M_{\text{NewPeople}} = 4.86, n_{\text{Friends}} = 50; M_{\text{Friends}} = 5.16; F(1, 181) = .61, p = .44$). Correlational evidence showed that the more conversational value
participants thought their conversation pieces had, the more likely they were to wear them to the party ($r = .32$, $p < .0001$), providing preliminary evidence that social and conversation goals influence how likely people are to wear conversation pieces.

Pre-study 2: T-Shirts as Conversation Pieces

Pre-study 1 showed that shirts and necklaces were common conversation pieces. In Pre-study 2 we focus on t-shirts as prototypical examples of conversation pieces because they are more gender neutral than are necklaces and thus make more versatile stimuli. Most (87%) of the shirts that were described as conversation pieces in Pre-study 1 had words or pictures on them. Therefore, we hypothesized that graphic t-shirts, which have words or pictures on them, are prototypical examples of conversation pieces. In contrast, plain t-shirts do not suggest a conversation topic and so seem less likely to be conversation pieces. In this study we tested whether we could use the graphic/non-graphic shirt distinction as an operationalization of the conversation piece/not conversation piece distinction. We also assessed how likely participants were to wear conversation pieces when they had the goal to meet new people and why they chose to wear or not wear a conversation piece. These findings provide preliminary insight into whether consumers are aware how conversation pieces may facilitate social interactions.

Participants and Procedure. One hundred participants (average age = 32 years old, 51% male) were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk to participate in this study.
One participant was eliminated for not writing about a specific t-shirt, leaving ninety-nine participants in the sample. All participants were first asked to imagine that they were going to go to a casual party where they wanted to meet new people. After reading a description of the party, they were asked to imagine that they had decided to wear a pair of jeans, shoes, and a t-shirt to the party. They were then asked to choose a t-shirt, from the ones they already owned, to wear to the party and to describe it and why they chose it. Then they answered the nine questions used in Pre-study 1 that measured the perceived conversational value of their shirt ($\alpha = .96$) to determine which types of shirts they predicted would make the best conversation pieces.

**Results and Discussion.** The first question we were interested in is whether graphic shirts are perceived to be better conversation pieces than plain shirts. Two trained coders classified the shirts as either graphic shirts or plain shirts. Their initial coding agreed in 99% of the cases (Krippendorff’s $\alpha = .98$), and the few differences were resolved by discussion. We found that participants who wore graphic shirts thought their shirts had significantly more conversational value than did participants who wore plain shirts ($M_{Graphic} = 5.02$, $M_{Plain} = 2.70$, $t (97) = 9.26$, $p < .0001$), showing that graphic t-shirts make better conversation pieces than do plain shirts. Using this operationalization of a conversation piece as a graphic shirt, we found that 57% of participants said they would wear a conversation piece to a party where they wanted to meet new people, while the remaining 43% said they would wear a plain shirt.
Trained coders also assessed the reasons participants gave for wearing the shirt they did. They assessed whether participants mentioned that their shirt might influence their social interactions (Krippendorff’s $\alpha = .79$), and, if they did mention it, whether they wanted their shirt to help them in their conversations (as opposed to making them appear to be a blank slate; Krippendorff’s $\alpha = .66$). Differences between coders were resolved by discussion. Sixty-two percent of participants indicated awareness that their clothing might influence their social interactions, and of these participants, 85% wanted their t-shirt choice to help them. Of the fifty-three participants who wanted their t-shirt choice to help them in their social interactions, 72% had chosen to wear a graphic shirt to the party.

This study is consistent with our argument that graphic shirts are perceived to have more conversational value than are plain t-shirts, justifying using graphic versus plain shirts as a manipulation of whether or not a product is a conversation piece in future studies. Furthermore, the free response explanations of why participants chose to wear conversation pieces provide initial evidence that consumers are aware of the conversational potential of their clothing, and a large majority of those who thought their clothing would affect their interactions wanted it to help them.
Appendix B: Interview Guide

Think about your time in the MBA program/as a Duke undergraduate so far, focusing on the people you have met and socializing you have done.

1. First can you start off by telling me a little about how you have gotten to know other MBA students so far in the first year of the MBA program (undergraduates) here at Duke.
2. Now I am going to focus on asking you about someone who you have met who you think you might become friends with. *Not romantic relationship*
   a. Can you describe your first meeting for me? Imagine you were observing it....
   b. How did you decide to talk to that person rather than some other people? Were there people who you avoided?
3. What qualities do you look for in a friend?
   a. If they do not mention similarity—do you tend to look for people who are similar to you in any ways? Preferences? Interests? Values?
4. In general when are you most open to meeting new people?

Observer’s Perspective
1. How do you decide if you want to approach or avoid someone / at a party/in class/at another social event?
2. How do you determine whether or not you are going to “click” with someone? What are signs that you are going to click and what are signs that you are not going to “click?”
3. People frequently comment on people’s clothes or the stuff that a person has with them. Have you ever done that? Can you describe some times when you have?
4. What do you think you can learn about someone based on their clothing or products?
5. How do you feel when you see someone wearing a shirt with a somewhat obscure reference (like a t-shirt from a not super-popular band or a line from a TV show, a joke that you find funny) that you “get?” How about one that you don’t “get?” Or one you disagree with?

Wearer’s Perspective
1. Why do you wear what you wear?
2. How did you decide what to wear today?
3. Under what circumstances do you pay a lot of attention to what you wear?
4. Has anyone ever started a conversation with you by asking you about/complimenting you on your clothing?
5. Have you ever had anyone make inferences about your interests or values or personality based on your clothing? If so can you describe the experience?
6. People sometimes wear clothing/accessories because they suspect that other people will compliment them/ask about them—do you ever do this?
7. Have you ever decided that you didn’t want to be friends with someone based on how they reacted to something that you were wearing? This doesn’t necessarily have to be a negative experience—it could just be the lack of a positive experience.

Now think about any conversation pieces that you may have. A conversation piece is an object, such as clothing, jewelry, or a painting in your house, that produces questions or interest from others—literally one that encourages conversations.

1. Do you have any conversation pieces? Can you describe them for me?
2. Why do you generally wear your conversation pieces (ask for each conversation piece)?
3. Why do you sometimes not wear your conversation pieces (ask for each conversation piece)?
4. Does your conversation piece get attention and can you turn this attention into a conversation?
5. When did you last wear your conversation piece (ask about each piece separately)? Did anyone ask you about it?
6. Has anyone reacted negatively to your conversation piece?
Appendix C: Boundary Condition Study on Likelihood to Approach

While this dissertation focuses on the role that conversation pieces can play in making conversations more likely, it is also possible that conversation pieces can sometimes make conversations less likely. In this study we examine one time when observers will be less likely to approach a person wearing a conversation piece than a person not wearing one: when the conversation piece leads the observer to predict that they will have a bad conversation with the wearer. The product we chose to examine this phenomenon is a shirt that communicates that the wearer is a vegan in a pushy, aggressive way (see procedure for details). Being a vegan is a controversial stance, and a pushy, aggressive shirt may make observers think that the wearer is going to force these beliefs upon them in conversation and thus that the conversation will be unpleasant. We predict that people will be less likely to approach a person wearing this conversation piece than they will be to approach a person wearing a plain shirt. Second, we directly assess predicted conversation quality to determine if it mediates the effect of the wearer’s shirt on the observer’s likelihood to approach.

Method

Participants and Design. Three hundred and forty-one participants (average age = 34 years old, 56% male) were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk to participate in
this study, which had a three cell between-subjects design (t-shirt style: plain shirt, gentle vegan shirt, pushy vegan shirt).

Procedure. All participants were asked to imagine that they were at a casual party with people whom they did not know and were looking for someone to talk to. Then they were asked to imagine that they saw a person who, depending on which condition they were in, was wearing a plain green shirt, a shirt printed with the message “I’m a vegan, but you don’t have to be” (gentle vegan), or a shirt printed with the message “Don’t ask me why I’m a vegan, ask yourself why you are not” (pushy vegan). The vegan shirts were designed to convey the same factual message, but differ in terms of tone and how desirable a conversation partner they made the wearer appear to be. A manipulation check found that the pushy vegan t-shirt was considered to be pushier than the gentle vegan t-shirt ($M_{Pushy} = 5.65, M_{Gentle} = 3.21, F (1, 338) = 151.58, p < .0001$). All participants were then asked how likely they would be to approach the person whose picture they saw, as well as predicted conversation quality and other questions described in the measures section. We predicted that observers would be less likely to approach a person in the pushy vegan shirt than the gentle vegan or plain shirt and that this effect would be mediated by predicted conversation quality.

Measures. In addition to measuring likelihood to approach, we also assessed predicted conversation quality, a composite variable made up of participants’ ratings of
how easy, awkward (reverse coded), and good they predicted a conversation with the person they saw would be (α = .85).

Participants also answered additional questions regarding how much they thought they would learn about the person they talked to, their initial impressions of the person they talked to, what their intentions would be for talking to this person again in the future, and perceived conversational control. Participants also answered a manipulation check and four individual difference measures.

Results

Conversation Quality. One of the main variables of interest was how the shirt affected predicted conversation quality. There was a main effect for shirt on predicted conversation quality (F(2, 338) = 11.7, p < .0001; see figure 6). When participants saw a person wearing a gentle vegan shirt (MGentle = 4.53) they anticipated having a better conversation with them than when they imagined approaching the person in the plain (MPlain = 4.11, F(1, 338) = 6.9, p = .009) or pushy vegan shirt (MPushy = 3.75, F(1, 338) = 23.36, p < .0001). Participants also anticipated having a worse conversation with the person in the pushy vegan shirt than with the person in the plain shirt (F(1, 338) = 4.83, p = .029).
Likelihood to Approach. The shirt also affected how likely participants were to approach the person they saw. There was a main effect of shirt seen on likelihood to approach ($F(2, 338) = 19.92, p < .0001$; see figure 7). Participants were less likely to approach the person in the pushy shirt ($M_{\text{Pushy}} = 2.92$) than in the gentle shirt ($M_{\text{Gentle}} = 4.19, F(1, 338) = 32.91, p < .0001$), or the plain shirt ($M_{\text{Plain}} = 4.08, F(1, 338) = 26.74, p < .0001$). The effect of the plain versus gentle vegan t-shirt was non-significant ($F(1, 338) = .28, p = .6$), likely because talking about even a friendly vegan shirt is not a very appealing topic to many people.
Mediation Analysis. Having established that the shirt affects predicted conversation quality, we next examine whether predicted conversation quality mediates the effect of the shirt manipulation on likelihood to approach. We use a multicategorical mediation model to determine whether predicted conversation quality mediates the effect of the shirt manipulation on likelihood to approach (Hayes and Preacher 2014). We assess two mediation models, one examining whether improved predicted conversation quality mediates the improvement from the plain shirt to the gentle shirt and one examining whether lowered predicted conversation quality mediates the negative impact of a pushy shirt on likelihood to approach. We analyzed the data using Preacher and Hayes’ bootstrapping methodology for indirect mediation with a multicategorical independent variable with 1000 bootstrap samples (Hayes 2013).
We first examine the role that predicted conversation quality plays in explaining why people are more likely to approach the person in the gentle vegan shirt than in the plain shirt. This direct effect was non-significant, but there was a significant positive indirect effect such that predicted conversation quality mediated the link between seeing a person who was wearing a plain versus gentle vegan shirt and likelihood to approach (95% CI: [.1144 - .6940]). When participants saw a person wearing a gentle vegan shirt rather than a plain shirt, they anticipated having a better conversation with them and so were more likely to approach, supporting hypothesis 5b (see figure 8A).

We then examined the role that predicted conversation quality played in explaining why participants were less likely to approach the person in the pushy vegan shirt than in the plain shirt. There was a significant negative indirect effect such that predicted conversation quality mediated the link between viewing a person who was wearing a plain versus pushy vegan shirt and likelihood to approach (95% CI [-.8361 -.3881]). When participants saw a person wearing a pushy vegan shirt rather than a plain shirt, they anticipated having a worse conversation with them and so were less likely to approach (see figure 8B). Predicted conversation quality also mediates the effect of shirt type of likelihood to approach when comparing the pushy vegan shirt to the gentle vegan shirt 95% CI: [.3991-1.0534].

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9 When the direct effect is non-significant, one can still draw conclusions about indirect effects and mediation (Zhao, Lynch, & Chen 2010).
Discussion

This study shows that conversation pieces affect how good observers think conversations will be, which in turn, influences likelihood to approach. It also shows a boundary condition on when observers are more likely to approach people who are wearing a conversation piece: Conversation pieces do not increase likelihood to approach if they do not suggest the observer will have a good conversation with the wearer (and in fact decrease likelihood to approach if they suggest a bad conversation.
will be forthcoming). The finding that the benefits of conversation pieces disappear when they do not seem like they would facilitate a good conversation is further evidence that predicted conversation quality is a key factor for why conversation pieces affect likelihood to approach.
Appendix D: Study 5 Supplemental Analysis

We asked two additional questions at the end of the study that made these alternative opening lines more salient. In the first question, we asked participants to imagine that they had started the conversation differently than they did—if they did not mention the shirt, they were asked “If you had mentioned the shirt, do you think your opening line would have been better or worse?”, and if they did mention the shirt, they were asked, “If you had not mentioned the shirt, do you think your opening line would have been better or worse?” Participants who mentioned the shirt thought that not mentioning the shirt would have led to a worse conversation, regardless of which shirt they saw ($F(2, 101) = .26, p = .77; M_{\text{Overall}} = 3.20$ (compared to $4 = \text{same as original opening line}$), $p < .0001$). However, among participants who did not mention the shirt originally, those who saw the plain shirt thought that mentioning it would be worse than their original opening line ($M = 3.53, t(92) = 2.88, p = .005$), those who saw the image only shirt thought that mentioning the shirt would be neither better nor worse ($M = 4.16, t(56) = .84, p = .41$), and those who saw the words and images shirt thought that mentioning it would be better ($M = 4.50, t(35) = 2.92, p = .006$).

As another way of making the comparisons more salient to participants, we showed participants all three of the shirts and for each, they answered the question, “How likely do you think this shirt would be to lead to a good opening line of the conversation?” A repeated measures ANOVA with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction
found that shirt type influenced predicted opening line quality ($F (1.95, 562.18) = 301.57, p < .0001$). The more information was on the shirt, the better opening lines participants thought it would generate ($M_{WordsAndImage} = 5.26, M_{ImageOnly} = 4.21, M_{Plain} = 2.42$, all $ps < .0001$).
Appendix E: Study 6 Extra Information on Participants

Differences by Wave. This study was conducted in two waves approximately one month apart. Wave one included one hundred and seven participants and wave two included eighty-nine. There were differences in agreeableness ($M_{Wave1} = 4.04$, $M_{Wave2} = 3.84$, $t(194) = 2.15$, $p = .03$) and conscientiousness ($M_{Wave1} = 3.72$, $M_{Wave2} = 3.50$, $t(194) = 1.99$, $p = .05$) between the two waves, but wave did not moderate any of the effects described in the paper.

Results on Full Sample. Most of the results of this study are unchanged in direction and significance if the participants who failed the manipulation checks are included in the sample. Analyses where including these participants changes the significance of the results are described below. Using the cleaned sample, the main effect of condition on conversation depth is significant. When all participants are included in the study, this effect is still significant, but the difference between the control condition and the conversation piece condition is marginal ($p = .09$). Using the cleaned sample, the main effect of condition on conversation quality is significant. When all participants are included in the study, this effect is marginal ($F(2, 162) = 2.90$, $p = .058$), and the control condition is not significantly different from the conversation piece condition. Using the cleaned sample, participants talked about conversation pieces with people who they knew less well. When all participants are included in the study, this effect becomes non-significant ($t(163) = 1.57$, $p = .12$)
Appendix F: Composite Variables

Pre-studies 1 and 2: Conversational value composite questions
1. How likely is it that the people at the party would comment or ask about your conversation piece?
2. How likely is it that the people at the party would start a conversation with you by commenting on or asking you about your conversation piece?
3. If you wore your conversation piece to the party how many people at the party do you think would comment on or ask you questions about it?
4. How interested would you be in talking with the people at the party about your conversation piece?
5. How interested do you think the other people at the party would be in talking about your conversation piece?
6. How much would you enjoy a conversation with the people at the party about your conversation piece?
7. How much do you think the other people at the party would enjoy talking about your conversation piece?
8. How awkward would a conversation about your conversation piece with the people at the party be? (r)
9. How easy would a conversation about your conversation piece with the people at the party be?

Study 2 Product Characteristic Composites
1. Attractive
   a. stylish
   b. pretty
   c. something you like
2. Autobiographical
   a. personal
   b. specific experience
   c. informative
   d. identity
   e. specific interest
3. Attention Grabbing
   a. colorful
   b. unusual
   c. bold
   d. stand out
   e. unique
   f. exotic
g. interesting
h. intriguing
i. eye-catching

Study 3 and 4: Predicted Conversation Quality Composite
1. How likely do you think you would be to have a good conversation with this person?
2. How enjoyable do you think a conversation with this person would be?
3. How easy do you think conversation would be with this person?
4. How awkward do you think conversation would be with this person? (r)
5. How forced do you think the conversation with this person would be? (r)

Study 4: Predicted Self-Disclosure Items
1. How likely do you think you would be to talk about any topic in depth with this person?
2. Self-disclosure refers to ‘the communication of personally relevant information, thoughts, and feelings to another.’ To what degree do you think this person would self-disclose to you if you were to talk with them?

Study 5: Opening Line Quality
1. How likely do you think this opening line would be to lead to a good conversation?
2. How likely do you think you would be to talk about the topic introduced in this opening line in depth?
3. Self-disclosure refers to ‘the communication of personally relevant information, thoughts, and feelings to another.’ To what degree do you think this opening line would lead the person to whom you asked the question to self-disclose?

Study 6: Perceived Conversation Quality
1. How enjoyable did this conversation feel to you?
2. How entertaining was talking to the person you talked to?
3. How responsive was the person you talked to to what you had to say?
4. How memorable was this conversation for you?
5. Would you define the conversation as being more like small talk or being more substantive?
6. How well did you get along with the person you talked to?

Study 6: Conversational Smoothness
1. How easy was having this conversation for you?
2. How much effort did you have to put into making this conversation work?
3. How forced did this conversation feel to you?
4. How awkward did this conversation feel to you?
Appendix G: Study Stimuli

Study 3 Stimuli

[Images of clothing]

- Button Down
- Conversation Piece
- Plain

Study 4 Stimuli

[Images of clothing]

- Anti-animal testing
- Plain
- Pro-pets
Study 7 Dialogue Sample

1. **Alex:** Hey, how’s it going? I’m Alex, what’s your name? So, do you like Chicago?
2. **Participant:** Hey Alex, I’m Renee. I do love Chicago very much.
3. **Alex:** Really? The Windy City?
4. **Participant:** Hahaha, yeah with the wind and all, I love Chicago.
5. **Alex:** I like it too. I actually lived there 7 years ago.
6. **Participant:** Really? I only visited Chicago during a spring break from college.
7. **Alex:** Where did you go?
8. **Participant:** I went to the House of Blues, this huge mall downtown and checked out some museums.
9. **Alex:** No Sears Tower?
10. **Participant:** Noooooo! And I wanted to go on the Sears Tower but we didn't have time.
11. **Alex:** It's alright. I'm not all that impressed with it but maybe because I've visited a few times.
References


Biography

Hillary Wiener was born in Stillwater, Oklahoma on June 7th, 1989. She attended Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, and she graduated Summa Cum Laude with a BA in psychology in 2011. She also attended Duke University in Durham, North Carolina and graduated with a PhD in marketing in 2017. She has published the following articles: “The Effect of Voice Quality on Ad Efficacy,” “Real Life Decision Making in College Students I: Consistency in Real-Life Decision Making,” and “Real Life Decision Making in College Students II: Do Individual Differences Reliably Affect Real-Life Decision Making?”