EXPANDING THE REALM OF POSSIBILITY:
MAGICAL THINKING AND CONSUMER COPING

by

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how consumers cope with stress and, specifically, the role of magical thinking in consumer coping. Magical thinking is defined here as creating or invoking ‘extraordinary’ connections – symbolic relationships founded on a belief or intuition in the presence of mystical forces in the world – in order to understand, predict, or influence events.

Previous research in the field of psychology has largely depicted magical thinking as a cognitive distortion or fallacious reasoning that emerges in stressful situations due to limited information-processing capacity or to provide an illusory sense of control (e.g., Zusne and Jones 1989). In contrast, I draw from research in sociology, anthropology, and religious studies to explore the cultural dimension of magical thinking. Building on Stivers’ (1999) culturally-based theory of magic, I seek to develop an understanding of magical thinking as a process of meaning negotiation whereby consumers invoke mystical forces to cope with stressful events. These themes are explored through a phenomenological investigation of consumers’ weight loss activities.

Findings provide insight on the nature and conceptual domain of magical thinking in the marketplace; magical thinking emerges as a set of practices that involves imparting moral meaning to a situation, reifying and externalizing one’s control over the situation, attempting to symbolically influence this powerful, mystical entity that is vested with control, and interpreting scientific symbols as objective signs from this entity. This research also advances our understanding of consumer coping by illuminating the role of magical thinking as a resource that expands the realm of the possible to help consumers cope with the moral responsibility for a domain over which they experience limited agency.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................... iii
Table of Contents ......................................................................................................... iv
List of Figures ............................................................................................................... vi
List of Tables ................................................................................................................ vii
Chapter 1 Introduction ............................................................................................... 1
Chapter 2 Stress and Coping ....................................................................................... 8
  2.1 Cognitive-Relational Theory of Stress and Coping .............................................. 8
  2.2 Stress and Coping in Consumption ..................................................................... 10
  2.3 Meaning and Consumer Coping ......................................................................... 13
    2.3.1 Cultural Meanings and Consumer Coping .................................................... 16
  2.4 Magical Thinking and Consumer Coping ............................................................ 20
Chapter 3 Magical Thinking ....................................................................................... 25
  3.1 What is Magical Thinking? .................................................................................. 25
    3.1.1 Magical Thinking is an Instrumental and Expressive Process ....................... 29
    3.1.2 Magical Thinking Coexists with Scientific Thinking ................................. 33
    3.1.3 Magical Thinking is Tied to Cultural Meanings .......................................... 35
  3.2 A Culturally-Based Theory of Magic and Magical Thinking ............................... 36
    3.2.1 Magic as Creative Persuasion ..................................................................... 38
    3.2.2 Magic as Retribution ................................................................................ 40
    3.2.3 Magic as Efficient Causality ..................................................................... 41
    3.2.4 Integration ................................................................................................. 42
  3.3 Magical Thinking and Consumer Coping ............................................................ 43
    3.3.1 Creative Persuasion and Consumer Agency ................................................ 44
    3.3.2 Retribution and Morality .......................................................................... 45
    3.3.3 Efficient Causality and Technology ........................................................... 46
  3.4 Conclusion ............................................................................................................ 47
Chapter 4 Research Agenda ....................................................................................... 48
  4.1 Goals of the Research ......................................................................................... 48
  4.2 Weight Loss as a Research Context .................................................................... 48
    4.2.1 Weight Loss Activities: An Important Consumption Phenomenon .......... 49
    4.2.2 Weight loss, Stress, and Coping ................................................................. 50
List of Figures

Figure 2-1: Cognitive-Relational Model of Stress and Coping ................................................. 9
Figure 2-2: Stress and Consumer Coping .................................................................................. 19
Figure 2-3: Antecedents to Magical Thinking ......................................................................... 21
Figure 3-1: Magical Thinking versus Scientific Thinking .......................................................... 32
Figure 5-1: Controll Advertisement ......................................................................................... 63
Figure 5-2: One-a-Day Weight Smart Advertisement ................................................................. 69
Figure 5-3: Nutri-Grain Bars Advertisement ........................................................................... 74
Figure 5-4: Original Hollywood Celebrity Diet Advertisement ............................................... 94
Figure 5-5: Meso-Tech Bars Advertisement ............................................................................. 96
List of Tables

Table 2-1: Coping and Meaning-making: Psychological and Cultural Perspectives .................. 22
Table 3-1: Definitions of Magical Thinking and Related Constructs .................................. 26
Table 3-2: Principles of Magic in the Milieu of Nature, Society, and Technology ............... 38
Table 4-1: Informants’ Profile ............................................................................................... 57
Table 4-2: Bloggers’ profile ................................................................................................. 59
Chapter 1
Introduction

Stress is a dominant feature of our daily life, from the mild tension associated with selecting the perfect gift for a friend to the devastation of losing a loved one, from the anxiety provoked by an appointment with a lawyer or financial planner to the pervasive burden of chronic illness. The relationship between stress and consumption is twofold: On one hand, consumption activities can represent a source of stress for consumers; on the other hand, people may engage in consumption activities to manage stressful events in other areas of their life. In recent years, consumer researchers have gained a growing appreciation of the importance of stress in consumer behavior. First, understanding the relationship between stress and consumption provides insight into an important category of consumption motives since the desire to reduce negative emotions associated with stress constitutes a key motive and goal in consumption activities (e.g., Luce 1998; Thompson 1996). Second, reactions to stress are likely to have a significant impact on the consumption process by affecting, for instance, the degree of decision effort exerted and the decision strategies employed (e.g., Luce, Bettman and Payne 2001; Mick and Fournier 1998). Finally, studying the relationship between stress and consumption sheds light on the adaptive and maladaptive consequences of consumption on consumer well-being (e.g., Moorman 2002; Pavia and Mason 2004).

Consumer research examining the relationship between stress and consumption has largely drawn from the extensive psychology literature on stress and coping and, in particular, from the predominant cognitive-transactional theory of stress (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). This approach defines coping as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus and Folkman 1984, p.141). A basic tenet of this framework is that stress...
and coping arise from *relational meaning*, that is, the personal significance of the relationship between an individual's situation – in terms of goals, beliefs, and resources – and the characteristics of the environment. In other words, stress (and subsequent coping reactions) arises from a person's appraisal that (1) a situation entails potential or actual negative consequences for his or her well-being, and that (2) the demands of the situation exceed the resources available to him or her for handling it. Appraisals are largely affected by the coping resources available to the person in a given context, including physical resources (e.g., health and energy), psychological resources (e.g., personality traits, positive beliefs), social resources (e.g., interpersonal network), and material resources.

Employing this theoretical perspective, consumer researchers have identified numerous characteristics of stressful events leading to coping; these include: conflicting goals and values, ambivalence, loss, change, lack or loss of control, uncertainty, and difficulty in reconciling discrepancies between desired and experienced states (Brunel and Pichon 2004; Hopkins, Roster and Wood 2006; Khan and Luce 2003; Luce 1998; Nowlis, Kahn and Dhar 2002). In addition, researchers have identified several coping strategies in the form of thoughts and behaviors consumers engage in when faced with stressful situations. Congenial with psychological research, consumer coping strategies are typically organized into broader categories that transcend individual and situational differences (e.g., Duhachek 2005). Despite nuances in conceptualizations, models of consumer coping generally posit that consumers will cope with stressful situations by drawing on various personal and social resources to deploy (1) *problem-focused* coping strategies that modify or eliminate the stressful event – e.g., enlisting the help of a specialist in choosing a complex product, (2) *emotion-focused* coping strategies that alter the person's perception of or reaction to the situation – e.g., venting to colleagues about a negative
service experience, or (3) avoidance coping strategies that altogether elude the stressful situation – e.g., postponing an anxiety-provoking purchase decision.

Stress and coping researchers in the field of psychology have also begun to examine the role of meaning-making in coping processes. From a psychological perspective, meaning is generally conceptualized in terms of personal significance. Park and Folkman (1997) distinguish between global meaning – a person’s fundamental beliefs, goals, assumptions, and expectations about the world – and situational meaning, which corresponds to cognitive appraisals of an event’s actual or potential impact for the person’s goals and beliefs. Meaning-making coping, then, involves modifying one’s core goals and beliefs or one’s interpretation of an event in order to eliminate dissonance between global and situational meaning. Recently, considerable attention has been devoted to exploring the role of religion as a set of beliefs that constitute a useful coping resource to gain meaning in the face of stressful events by drawing on what is perceived to be sacred (Pargament 1997; Park 2005; Silberman 2005).

In seeking further insight into the role of meaning in consumer coping, it may be useful to go beyond the psychological perspective to find other resources and meaning-making mechanisms at work in coping and, in particular, to consider approaches that emphasize the cultural and linguistic aspects of meaning. In consumer research, this view is reflected in Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005) which “refers to a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationship between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings” (p.868). This theoretical perspective emphasizes the cultural, symbolic, context-specific and dynamic nature of meaning. Meaning is thus neither uniformly shared and imposed by culture nor entirely subjective or idiosyncratic (Thompson 1997). This approach allows us to construe the marketplace as a collection of symbolic meanings consumers may use and manipulate as coping resources. Research conducted under the umbrella of Consumer Culture
Theory has begun to articulate the rich and complex role of cultural and symbolic aspects of meaning in consumer coping. This approach, for instance, illuminates how consumers draw on and negotiate the symbolic meaning of brands and possessions to cope with anxiety experienced during life transitions (Fournier 1998; Noble and Walker 1997) or the death of a loved one (Gentry et al. 1995; Kates 2001).

Building on a cultural view of meaning, the present research examines meaning-making in consumer coping. Specifically, the analytical lens of magical thinking is adopted to explore how consumers manipulate meanings to cope with stress. Magical thinking is defined here as creating or invoking ‘extraordinary’ connections – symbolic relationships founded on a belief or intuition in the presence of mystical forces in the world – in order to understand, predict, or influence events. The concept of magical thinking represents an intriguing avenue to gain further insight into consumer coping because, on one hand, antecedents to magical thinking mirror those of psychological coping models and, on the other hand, magical thinking theories allow for a richer description of the meaning in consumer coping by considering the role of mystical, supernatural forces. Research suggests that, when faced with situations of uncertainty, loss, absence of control, or inability to attain a desired outcome – situations sharing characteristics analogous to stressful events described in the coping literature – people often engage in magical thinking by creating and using meaning-based connections to understand and influence situation outcomes (Nemeroff and Rozin 2000; Vyse 1997; Zusne and Jones 1989). The concept of magical thinking turns our attention to the role of mystical forces in consumer coping; meaning-making then involves creating and invoking symbolic relationships in which these mystical forces provide ways to understand and influence stressful events.

Drawing on Richard Stivers’ (1999) culturally-based theory of magic, I propose that magical thinking constitutes an important resource in consumption coping and I seek to examine
the role of magical thinking as a process of meaning negotiation whereby consumers draw on mystical forces to cope with stress. This analysis is articulated around three principles of magical thinking: creative persuasion, retribution, and efficient causality (Stivers 1999). First, the principle of creative persuasion is premised on a participative worldview in which there is no boundary between humans and nature or between the objective and subjective. Through creative persuasion, consumers participate in the creation of reality by appealing to mysterious forces residing in nature. Creative persuasion thus speaks to consumers’ negotiation of the boundary between reality and fantasy, and to the role of agency in coping. Specifically, magical thinking proposes that consumer agency is enacted within the construction of a world inhabited by mysterious forces that can be persuaded to bring forth desired ends.

Second, the principle of retribution implies that consumers invoke moral beliefs to understand and cope with stressful events as they negotiate the tension between good and evil. To date, the moral dimension of coping is largely articulated in terms of religious beliefs. The principle of retribution suggests that magical thinking constitute an additional way in which consumers invoke sacred meanings to cope with stressful events.

Finally, the principle of efficient causality presents a view of magical thinking as an imitation of technology and a compensation for its effects. Efficient causality is premised on the omnipotence of technology that is embodied in consumer goods (Stivers 1999) and expressed in a proclivity for magical solutions to life’s problems (Peele 1982). Efficient causality thus offers a theoretical lens for examining how consumers use products as magical coping resources.

Furthermore, it promises to provide insight into consumers’ magical expectations of the process and outcomes associated with the coping strategies they adopt. Thus, the purpose of the present research is to contribute to our understanding of consumer coping by developing a magical thinking perspective of meaning.
My exploration of magical thinking in consumer coping is undertaken within a phenomenological investigation of consumers’ weight loss projects. This constitutes a rich context for the study of consumer coping since it involves sources of stress that are both endogenous to the market (e.g., paradoxes and contradictions among diet claims) and exogenous to the market (e.g., negative health consequences of being overweight). Furthermore, weight control activities represent an important domain of consumption as they constitute a central, yet mundane, aspect of consumers’ identity projects.

This dissertation contributes to consumer research through an integration and extension of multi-disciplinary perspectives on coping, meaning, and magical thinking. In particular, my findings provide insight on the nature and conceptual domain of magical thinking in the marketplace; magical thinking emerges as a set of practices that involves imparting moral meaning to a situation, reifying and externalizing one’s control over the situation, attempting to symbolically influence this powerful, mystical entity that is vested with control, and interpreting scientific symbols as objective signs from this entity. This research also advances our understanding of consumer coping by illuminating the role of magical thinking as a resource that expands the realm of the possible to help consumers cope with the moral responsibility for a domain over which the consumer experiences limited agency.

The remainder of this dissertation proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 reviews literature on stress and consumer coping with the goal of articulating the opportunity to develop further insight into this phenomenon though an exploration of meaning-making. Next, chapter 3 integrates multi-disciplinary research on magical thinking to develop a framework capable of informing the role of meaning in consumer coping. Chapter 4 then defines the research agenda, introduces consumer weight control activities as a context of investigation, and presents the qualitative research plan that guided the research. Findings from my phenomenological examination of magical thinking
and consumer coping in the context of weight loss projects are presented in Chapter 5. My theoretical interpretation of consumers’ weight loss stories in relation to broader issues pertaining to the domains of magical thinking and coping is articulated through the themes of magical agency, morality and technology are developed. Finally, Chapter 6 provides a discussion of the dissertation’s findings and contributions. Limitations and suggestions for future research are also highlighted.
Chapter 2
Stress and Coping

The purpose of this dissertation is to gain further insight into consumer coping. To this end, the present chapter endeavors to circumscribe the primary domain of investigation and to review relevant literature on this topic. First, a cognitive-relational theory of stress and coping is presented and key concepts are defined. The relationship of consumption to stress and coping is then articulated. Next, research on consumer coping is reviewed; parallels and distinctions with coping research from the field of psychology are discussed, with the goal of identifying unique contributions from both areas. In particular, the role of meaning negotiation and sacred beliefs in consumer coping is recognized as a promising domain of investigation. Magical thinking is finally proposed as a useful analytical lens to examine these issues.

2.1 Cognitive-Relational Theory of Stress and Coping

Coping is a process that arises as a response to stress; it encompasses any mental and behavioral activity a person engages in to regulate internal or external demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding his or her resources (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). According to the widely accepted cognitive-relational theory of stress (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), stress is a function of both the stressor and the individual. The appraisal of a given event determines how stressful or benign it is for an individual. This appraisal, also labeled “relational meaning”, represent an assessment of the personal significance of the relationship between an individual’s situation – in terms of goals, beliefs, and resources – and the characteristics of the environment. Consequently, stress (and subsequently coping) arises from a person’s appraisal, on one hand, that a situation entails potential or actual negative consequences for his or her well-being and, on the other hand,
that the demands of the situation exceed the resources available to him or her for handling it.

Figure 2.1 illustrates the cognitive-transactional model of stress and coping.

Figure 2-1: Cognitive-Relational Model of Stress and Coping

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) posit that the coping process is largely affected by the coping resources available in a given context. These resources include physical resources (e.g., health and energy), psychological resources (e.g., personality traits, positive beliefs, problem-solving skills), social resources (e.g., interpersonal network, social support), and material resources (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Pearlin and Schooler 1978). The role of coping resources is twofold: First, they intervene during secondary appraisals to influence the degree to which an event is perceived as stressful. For instance, a person’s financial resources might influence to what extent he or she perceives unexpected, expensive car repairs as stressful. Second, coping resources affect how individuals respond to a stressful event. Indeed, coping resources influence the selection of certain coping strategies over others when faced with a stressful situation. For example, a longitudinal study of people undergoing surgery found that self-efficacy is a personal
coping resource associated with more active and positive coping strategies (Schwarzer et al. 2005). The relevance of examining stress and coping processes in consumption is discussed next.

2.2 Stress and Coping in Consumption

Consumption is broadly related to stress and coping in two ways. First, consumption activities may be perceived as stressful and thus trigger coping processes. Stressful consumption-related activities include, for instance, decisions that entail choice conflicts between goals highly important to a consumer (Luce, Bettman and Payne 2001), experiences that simultaneously encompass oppositely valued consequences (Mick and Fournier 1998; Rose and Wood 2005), and marketplace discrimination (Adkins and Ozanne 2005b; Crockett, Grier and Williams 2003; Viswanathan, Rosa and Harris 2005). Coping with stressful consumption situations is likely to have a significant impact on consumer behavior. Indeed, this situation may influence and even disrupt consumers’ decision process by altering the degree of decision effort exerted and favoring certain decision strategies (Luce 1998; Luce, Bettman and Payne 2001; Otnes, Lowrey and Shrum 1997). It can also affect how consumers use the products they own (Mick and Fournier 1998) or their post-consumption activities such as complaint behaviors (Stephens and Gwinner 1998).

Second, people may engage in consumption activities as a way of coping with stress elicited in other areas of their lives. This may occur, for example, when consumers develop brand relationships (Fournier 1998) or use symbolic possessions (Noble and Walker 1997) to facilitate the role transitions often involved in life events such as career changes, retirement, marriage or divorce, to cope with the death of a loved one (Gentry et al. 1995; Kates 2001), or to confront their own mortality (Pavia and Mason 2004). In this context, studying coping contributes to our understanding of important consumption motives.
Research on stress and coping in consumption largely follows the agenda from the field of psychology, examining antecedents to coping, the nature of coping, and its outcomes (Beehr and McGrath 1996). Consumer coping research initially drew on nomenclatures from the psychology literature to distinguish between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping (e.g., Brunel and Pichon 2004; Crockett et al. 2003; Luce et al. 2001). Problem-focused coping – also called problem solving (Amirkhan 1990), task-oriented coping (Endler and Parker 1990), or primary control (Rothbaum, Weisz and Snyder 1982) – refers to efforts directed at managing or altering a stressful event (Folkman and Lazarus 1980). Examples of consumer problem-focused coping include exerting additional efforts to identify the most accurate decision alternative (Luce et al. 2001) or complaining to company management in response to perceived marketplace discrimination (Crockett et al. 2003). Emotion-focused coping – also labeled seeking social support (Amirkhan 1990), emotion-oriented coping (Endler and Parker 1990), or secondary control (Rothbaum, Weisz and Snyder 1982) – consists of efforts to regulate one’s emotional response to a stressful event (Folkman and Lazarus 1980). Consumers employing emotion-focused coping might, for example, use humor to distance themselves emotionally from a stressful consumption situation (Crockett et al. 2003). Consumer researchers sometimes regard avoidance strategies, such as selecting a product that avoids explicit trade-offs (Luce 1998) or ignoring negative comments from others (Janda and Trocchia 2001), as a form of emotion-focused strategy. However, research in psychology usually treats avoidance as a distinct form of coping (Amirkhan 1990, Endler and Parker 1990). Other consumer avoidance strategies include postponing a stressful purchase decision or discontinuing the usage of an anxiety-producing product (Mick and Fournier 1998; Otnes, Lowrey and Shrum 1997).

Some researchers have argued that psychology models should be extended or refined to reflect consumer coping. For instance, Janda and Trocchia (2001) found that consumerscope
with the tensions associated with adopting a vegetarian lifestyle by employing problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. Their study, however, also suggests a third form of coping – labeled concession-based coping – whereby consumers compromise to reduce the source of tension and then rationalize their decision to do so. More recently, Duhachek (2005) proposed a three-dimensional model of consumer coping comprised of eight specific coping strategies. This model is consistent with the nomenclature described above in categorizing coping strategies into active coping, expressive support seeking, and avoidance, which are conceptually comparable to problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidance, respectively. The model also enriches previous conceptualizations of coping by delineating specific coping strategies consumers adopt across a variety of stressful consumption episodes: active coping, rational thinking, positive thinking, emotional support, instrumental support, emotional venting, avoidance, and denial.

Hence, the studies discussed above suggest that psychological models constitute useful frameworks for understanding consumer coping; in particular, these models help us to grasp how consumption activities may be perceived as stressful and the coping nomenclatures developed in the field of psychology provide a valuable starting point to understand consumer reactions to stressful events. Extant consumer research also demonstrates that consumption is a fertile domain to further develop our understanding of coping by identifying, for instance, additional relevant coping resources and strategies.

Recent research in psychology has proposed that coping models should also consider the role of meaning in coping; consequently, the concept of meaning-focused coping has garnered growing attention (e.g., Gottlieb and Gignac 1996; Park and Folkman 1997). Yet, examinations of this concept in consumer research remain scarce. The next section briefly reviews psychological research on meaning in coping with the goal of beginning to articulate the opportunities it offers
for gaining further insight into consumer coping. I then argue that consumer research conducted under the umbrella of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) provides a complementary perspective to examine this theme.

2.3 Meaning and Consumer Coping

Meaning plays a central role in coping. As discussed earlier, stress arises from a person’s assessment of relational meaning, that is, the significance for that person of what is happening in the person-environment relationship. Since stress surfaces from one’s interpretation of a situation, researchers have proposed that altering this interpretation, or manipulating meaning, constitutes an important coping strategy (Carver, Scheier and Weintraub 1989; Park and Folkman 1997).

Recently, Lazarus (2006) acknowledged that his model of coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984) overlooks important aspects of the complex and multi-dimensional nature of meaning:

> It emphasizes only part of the coping process, however, and maybe not the most important part – that is, coping thoughts and acts that are presented without references to the personal meaning of what is going on. It is this meaning that gives vitality to our lives. Meaning incorporates our goals, cherished beliefs, and situational intentions. (p.22)

From a psychological perspective, meaning is generally conceptualized in terms of cognitive appraisal of an event’s actual or potential impact on a person’s goals and the configuration of the event’s characteristics in relation to a person’s beliefs and values. This conceptualization reflects the origin of the cognitive-transactional theory in the “cognitive revolution” in psychology, which emphasizes the relationship between cognition and emotion.

Synthesizing across various conceptualizations of meaning from a psychological perspective, Park and Folkman (1997) define meaning as perceptions of significance and distinguish two levels of meaning: global meaning and situational meaning. Global meaning refers to “the most abstract and generalized level of meaning: people’s basic goals and
fundamental assumptions, beliefs, and expectations about the world” (p.116). In contrast, situational meaning corresponds to “the interaction of a person’s global beliefs and goals and the circumstances of a particular person-environment transaction” (p.121). In this model, meaning-making or search for meaning constitutes a coping strategy that entails “the eventual integration of situational meaning with global meaning through cognitive reappraisals of both the appraised meaning of the situation and global meaning and goals” (p.132). In other words, meaning-making involves modifying one’s goals and beliefs or one’s interpretation of a given event in order to eliminate any dissonance between the two schemas. A scale designed specifically to measure meaning-making is still lacking and Park (2005) utilizes the positive reinterpretation and growth scale of the COPE inventory (Carver, Scheier and Weintraub 1989) to assess the construct; this scale comprises the following items: “I look for something good in what is happening,” “I try to see it in a different light, to make it seem more positive,” “I learn something from the experience,” and “I try to grow as a person as a result of the experience.” Exploring the nature of coping strategies in consumption contexts, Duhachek (2005) identifies a construct analogous to meaning-making, which he labels positive thinking coping strategies and defines as “attempts to psychologically reconstrue a source of stress in order to make it more tolerable” (p.46). This construct is operationalized through a four-item scale: “Try to look at the bright side of things,” “Focus on the positive aspects of the problem,” “Look for the good in what happened,” “Try to make the best of the situation.” In sum, from a psychological perspective, meaning is conceptualized as idiosyncratic cognitive structures in the form of beliefs, goals, and appraisals and meaning-making involves manipulating these cognitive structures to eliminate dissonance.

Recently, the role of religion in meaning-making coping has attracted considerable attention; in particular, Pargament and colleagues (Hill and Pargament 2003; Kinney et al. 2003; Pargament 1997; Pargament, Koenig and Perez 2000) have documented the prevalence of
religious coping, whereby individuals rely on religious beliefs to gain a sense of control, meaning, and comfort in the face of stressful events. In this line of research, religion is conceptualized as a meaning system — more specifically a set of beliefs — that constitutes a resource people can draw on to cope with stressful events (Park 2005; Silberman 2005). Silberman (2005) describes religion as a meaning system that is similar to other idiosyncratic meaning systems in that it is comprised of descriptive and motivational beliefs that function as a lens through which reality is perceived and interpreted; yet, religion is unique because it centers on what is perceived to be sacred. Likewise, Pargament (1997) defines religion as “a search for significance in ways related to the sacred” (p.32). The sacred, in turn, refers to:

things that are holy, ‘set apart’ from the ordinary, and worthy of veneration. The sacred includes concepts of higher powers, such as the divine, God, and the transcendent […]. The sacred also includes objects that are sanctified or take on a sacred status through their association with, or representation of the divine. (Pargament, Magyar-Russell and Murray-Swank 2005, p.668)

A person’s religious beliefs thus constitute a coping resource he or she can draw on in the face of a stressful event. Religious beliefs are notably invoked as a resource in meaning-making coping, as they help the individual to interpret an event in a more positive light:

When the sacred is seen working its will in life’s events, what first seems random, nonsensical and tragic is changed into something else – an opportunity to appreciate life more fully, a chance to be with God, a challenge to help others grow, or a loving act meant to prevent something to take place. (Pargament 1997, p.223)

Pargament, Koening and Perez (2000) propose that religious meaning in stressful situations can be sought in several ways: by redefining the stressor as an opportunity for spiritual growth (e.g., “I saw my situation as part of God’s plan”), by redefining the situation as a punishment from God (e.g., “I felt punished by God for my lack of devotion”), by redefining the situation as the work of the Devil (e.g., “I felt the situation was the work of the devil”), and by
questioning God’s power to affect the situation (e.g., “I questioned the power of God”).

Underlying all these meaning-making coping strategies is the concept of sanctification – or attribution of spiritual significance to an event – as a meaning-making process (Pargament and Mahoney 2005). In other words, religious coping involves the attribution of sacred qualities to an event.

Models of religious coping have been developed as a subset of psychological approaches to understanding meaning-making in coping; that is, religion is understood as a particular meaning system that constitutes a coping resource and provides meaning-making strategies (Pargament 1997; Park 2005). Kwilecki (2004) proposes that we look beyond the psychological perspective to understand the role of religion in coping. Building on a religious studies approach, for instance, she identifies magical rituals and religious experiences as two modes of religious coping that have thus far been overlooked in coping research. In consumer research, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) has emerged as a significant alternative to psychological conceptualizations of meaning. The next section discusses Consumer Culture Theory as a useful perspective to develop our understanding of meaning-making mechanisms at work in consumer coping.

2.3.1 Cultural Meanings and Consumer Coping

In seeking further insight into the role of meaning in consumer coping, it may be useful to consider how the concept has been conceptualized in other fields and, in particular, to employ approaches that emphasize the cultural and linguistic aspects of meaning (e.g., Geertz 1973). In consumer research, this perspective is reflected in Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005) which “refers to a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationship between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings” (p.868). In this framework, the construct of meaning diverges from psychological conceptualizations in three
important ways. First, Consumer Culture Theory construes culture as the main source of meaning (Arnould and Thompson 2005). As such, meaning comprises two components: cultural categories and cultural principles (McCracken 1986). Cultural categories represent basic distinctions that segment the world into discrete concepts whereas cultural principles refer to ideas or values that organize this segmentation. Second, Consumer Culture Theory recognizes that meaning is relationally constituted in that it is assigned by a community of interpreters within a given sociohistorical context (Holt 1997). Meaning is thus dynamic and context-specific. Finally, Consumer Culture Theory embraces consumers’ active role in meaning construction so that meaning is neither uniformly shared and imposed by culture nor entirely subjective or idiosyncratic (Thompson 1997):

[C]onsumer culture does not determine action as a causal force. Much like a game where individuals improvise within the constraints of rules, consumer culture – and the marketplace ideology it conveys – frames consumers’ horizons of conceivable action, feeling, and thought, making certain patterns of behaviors and sense-making interpretations more likely than others. (Arnould and Thompson 2005, p.869)

Consumer researchers adopting this broader conceptualization have already provided insight into the rich and complex role of cultural and symbolic aspects of meaning in consumer coping. In particular, this stream of research illustrates how consumers rely on and negotiate the symbolic meaning of brands and possessions to cope with the anxiety experienced during life transitions (Fournier 1998; Noble and Walker 1997) or the death of a loved one (Gentry et al. 1995; Kates 2001). Furthermore, consumption lifestyles represent an important resource to cope with stress. For instance, consumers may adopt natural health goals to reduce everyday stress (Thompson and Troester 2002) or adopt voluntary simplicity to manage the anxiety associated with living in a consumer society (Zavestoski 2002). Finally, Pavia and Mason (2004) propose that consumption activities do not simply constitute a coping strategy adopted to deal with
stressful events. Instead, their study of the role of consumption in coping with a life-threatening illness suggests a reflexive relationship between consumption and coping, whereby consumers assign meanings to their consumption behaviors as a signal of their beliefs about the future.

It is important to note that these studies have not generally been conducted under the umbrella of coping research; nevertheless, they illustrate the contribution of considering cultural facets of meaning in understanding consumers’ reactions to stress. This approach allows us to construe the marketplace as a collection of symbolic cultural meanings that consumers may draw on as coping resources. It also suggests that consumption activities can represent meaning-making coping strategies.

Figure 2.2 sums up key elements from the discussion presented thus far by providing an overview of relevant research on stress and consumer coping, integrating research based on psychological frameworks and research conducted from the perspective of Consumer Culture Theory. Figure 2.2 first illustrates how consumer researchers examine stressors that are endogenous to the market, such as price negotiations or tensions associated with consumption lifestyles, as well as stressors exogenous to the market, including lack of control in personal relationships and mortal illness. The figure also depicts how consumer coping reactions can be classified in terms of problem-focused coping (coping by modifying or eliminating the stressful event), emotion-focused coping (coping by altering one’s reaction to the stressful event), and avoidance coping (coping by avoiding the stressful event). Finally, the figure shows how Consumer Culture Theory contributes to this area of research by proposing ways in which consumers negotiate with cultural, symbolic meaning to cope with stressful events.
**Figure 2-2: Stress and Consumer Coping**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRESSORS ENDOGENOUS TO THE MARKET</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Choices with trade-offs between important goals (Luce 1998; Luce et al. 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Marketplace discrimination (Crockett et al. 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Paradoxes of technological products (Mick and Fournier 1998) or reality TV (Rose and Wood 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Dissatisfying marketplace experiences (Stephens and Gwinner 1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Living in consumer society (Zavestoski 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Tensions associated to consumption lifestyles (Janda and Trocchia 2001; Thompson and Troester 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Role, custom, and value conflict (Otnes et al. 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Price negotiations (Trocchia 2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Food-related risks (Brunel and Pichon 2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- False-alarm test results (Kahn and Luce 2003)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRESSORS EXOGENOUS TO THE MARKET</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Functional illiteracy (Viswanathan et al. 2005) and stigma of low literacy (Adkins and Ozanne 2005b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Value conflict (Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Anomie and self-doubt (Chang and Arkin 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Lack of control in personal relationships (Elliott et al. 1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Life / role transitions (Fournier 1998; Mathur et al. 2003; Noble and Walker 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Feeling of alienation and frustration (Goulding 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Homelessness (Hill 1991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Confronting mortality (Pavia and Mason 2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- “Juggling” lifestyle (Thompson 1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Everyday life stresses (Thompson and Troester 2002)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COPING BY MODIFYING / ELIMINATING STRESSFUL EVENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Increased decision effort (Luce et al. 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Confrontation strategies (Brunel and Pichon 2004; Mick and Fournier 1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Clarification strategies (Brunel and Pichon 2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Outing; Formal complaint (Crockett et al. 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Word-of-mouth (Crockett et al. 2003; Nyer 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Active coping (Duhachek 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Simplification; Seeking assistance (Otnes et al. 1997)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COPING BY ALTERING PERCEPTION OF / REACTION TO THE STRESSFUL EVENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Creating emotional distance; Trivializing strain; Internalization (Crockett et al. 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Expressive support seeking (Duhachek 2005)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COPING BY AVOIDING THE STRESSFUL EVENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Choice of status quo option (Luce 1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Delay in planned adherence to tests (Kahn and Luce 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Avoidance (Duhachek 2005; Mick and Fournier 1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Denial (Duhachek 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Fantasy as escape (Hill 1991)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COPING THROUGH MEANING NEGOTIATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Forming brand relationships (Fournier 1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Meaning negotiation through possessions (Gentry et al. 1995; Kates 2001; Noble and Walker 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Creation of new values (Rose and Wood 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Adopting natural health goals (Thompson and Troester 2002) or voluntary simplicity (Zavestoski 2002)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Building on religious coping and CCT literatures, the present research employs the analytical lens of magical thinking to explore the role of meaning in consumer coping. In particular, I propose that magical thinking constitutes an important resource in consumption coping and I seek to examine the role of magical thinking as a process of meaning negotiation whereby consumers draw on mystical forces to achieve concrete coping ends. These themes are discussed next.

2.4 Magical Thinking and Consumer Coping

In this dissertation, magical thinking is defined as creating or invoking ‘extraordinary’ connections – symbolic relationships founded on a belief or intuition in the presence of mystical forces in the world – in order to understand, predict, or influence events. The concept of magical thinking is relevant to the study of consumer coping because, on one hand, antecedents to magical thinking mirror those of psychological coping models and, on the other hand, magical thinking theories allow for a richer description of the meaning dimension of consumer coping.

In the psychology literature, magical thinking has generally been defined as erroneous reasoning based on beliefs that violate accepted views of reality (Woolley 1997). Through magical thinking, the scientific division between the subjective and the objective disappears so that events in the world are perceived to be affected by the subjective, such as thoughts, desires, words, or symbolic actions (Hippler 1977; Nemeroff and Rozin 2000; Rosengren and Hickling 2000). As illustrated in Figure 2.3, antecedents to magical thinking largely mirror those associated with coping; indeed, magical thinking arises in situations characterized by uncertainty (Zusne and Jones 1989), anxiety (Salander 2000), and absence of control (Bolton et al. 2002). Keinan (1994, 2002) thus proposes that people engage in magical thinking to cope with stress.
Importantly, however, this line of research construes magical thinking as a superstitious, primitive form of thinking people engage in to gain a sense of control in the absence of control or when they do not have the cognitive resources available to adequately process information.

**Figure 2-3: Antecedents to Magical Thinking**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ANTECEDENTS TO MAGICAL THINKING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>· Absence of control (Bolton et al. 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Anxiety (Salander 2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Uncertainty (Vyse 1997; Zusne and Jones 1989)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Fear (Piaget 1929)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Desperation (Marshall and Larimer 1995)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Stress (Keinan 1994, 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Gap in knowledge (Woolley 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Gap between desired and experienced states (Serban 1974; Stivers 1999)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FORMS OF MAGICAL THINKING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>· Invoking mystical or fantastical determinants of individual fate (Adorno et al. 1950)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Investment of inanimate and non-human objects with human qualities (Hippler 1977)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Confluence of the subjective and the objective (Hippler 1977; Nemeroff and Rozin 2000; Rosengren and Hickling 2000; Shafr and Tversky 1992; Stivers 1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Belief in miraculous healing (Zusne and Jones 1989)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Superstition (Vyse 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Invoking personal luck in games of chance (Darke and Freedman 1997a,b; Wohl and Enzle 2002, 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Belief that emotion management influences illness outcome (Rosenberg 1997; Salander 2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Belief in supernatural energy (Heelas 1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Moral contagion (Comer and Nemeroff 2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Participation (Piaget 1929)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Cinderella syndrome (Marshall and Larimer 1995)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In contrast, research in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and religious studies underscores the cultural dimension of magic and magical thinking. In particular, Stivers (1999) argues that magic is defined in terms of what is perceived to be sacred in a given society and,
furthermore, that it is invoked to resolve the defining tensions inherent in the dominant meaning system of an era. The singularity of magical thinking thus lies in its combination of instrumental and expressive ends (Tambiah 1990), as it constitutes an attempt to influence events through symbolic means. More specifically, magical thinking entails an effort to mobilize mysterious forces to achieve desired ends.

Building on a cultural dimension of magical thinking, the objective of this dissertation is to develop a magical thinking perspective of consumer coping. This exercise is premised on two unique characteristics of magical thinking: First, magical thinking introduces mystical forces as a coping resource. Second, magical thinking adds to our understanding of meaning-making coping by turning our attention to the creation and use of symbolic relationships invoking these mystical forces. Table 2.1 summarizes similarities and distinctions regarding coping resources, meaning, and meaning making from psychological and cultural approaches and, more specifically, from the perspective of magical thinking.

**Table 2-1: Coping and Meaning-making: Psychological and Cultural Perspectives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychological perspectives</th>
<th>CCT perspectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meaning-making coping</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive reappraisal to eliminate dissonance between one’s goals and beliefs and one’s interpretation of an event</td>
<td>Sanctification of an event (i.e., attribution of spiritual significance) as the basis for religious reappraisal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religious coping</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal significance of an event for one’s goals, beliefs, and values</td>
<td>Perception of spiritual significance (i.e., sacredness)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coping resources</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical, psychological, social, and material resources</td>
<td>Religious beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meaning</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal significance of an event for one’s goals, beliefs, and values</td>
<td>Perception of spiritual significance (i.e., sacredness)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural categories and cultural principles</strong></td>
<td>Sacred cultural categories and cultural principles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Belief or intuition in mystical forces that inhabit the world</strong></td>
<td>Magical thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Creating and invoking extraordinary symbolic relationships to understand, predict, or influence events</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To illustrate how these perspectives evoke different coping resources and meaning-making activities, let’s examine how research from each perspective has approached a common phenomenon: coping with a life-threatening illness. First, a psychological meaning-making coping framework (Park and Folkman 1997) suggests that meaning-making involves modifying one’s core beliefs, values, and goals (global meaning) or one’s appraisal of an event (situational meaning). This is depicted, for instance, when heart attack patients reappraise their negative experience to perceive positive benefits, such as fostering closer family relationships or learning new values (Affleck et al. 1987). This type of meaning-making coping may be influenced by a variety of coping resources, including social resources such as the support of family members and psychological resources such as optimism as a personality trait. Congenial with this approach are religious coping frameworks (Pargament 1997), which entail a similar meaning-making process that aims to reconcile global and situational meaning. Religious meaning-making coping, however, also involves sanctification of the event, that is, the attribution of spiritual significance to the negative experience. Religious coping focuses on the person’s religious beliefs as the relevant coping resource. For example, a person may cope with illness by interpreting it as a lesson from God and an opportunity for growth or as a punishment from God for past sins (Pargament, Koenig and Perez 2000).

Turning to Consumer Cultural Theory approaches, the emphasis shifts to the role of marketplace cultural meanings as coping resources; meaning-making involves the use and transformation of these meanings in the pursuit of identity projects and lifestyle goals. Pavia and Mason’s (2004) study of women confronted with breast cancer represents this theoretical perspective by proposing that “the meanings consumers ascribe to their consumption behaviors reveal the nature of their implicit beliefs about their future, to both themselves and others” (p.442). For example, making a large, future-oriented purchase like a house becomes one
woman’s catalyst for beginning to envision a long, healthy future. Consumption activities thus become a symbol that expresses the person’s future orientation in the face of a life-threatening illness. Finally, a magical thinking perspective turns our attention to various mystical forces as a central coping resource; meaning-making, then, involves creating symbolic relationships in which these mystical forces provide ways to understand and influence a stressful event. For example, Salander (2000) describes how a young woman employs magical thinking to cope with her anxiety following a bone-marrow transplant. In doing so, she reifies the disease as a supernatural force (“Cancer is like a spirit you have to try to cheat”) and begins a process of negotiation based on a magical belief that her emotions influence the outcome of her illness (“If I feel bad, I might not become diseased again. The spirit leaves me alone”). As we will see later, this corresponds to magical thinking under the principle of retribution, wherein moral actions are believed to influence events in the world.

The next chapter reviews relevant literature on magical thinking to develop the analytical framework that will inform an empirical examination of meaning-making in consumer coping.
Chapter 3
Magical Thinking

The objective of this chapter is to introduce the construct of magical thinking and to establish its usefulness as an analytical lens to gain additional insight into consumer coping. Magical thinking does not constitute a coherent theory in the literature; research on this topic is eclectic, fragmented, and multi-disciplinary. Consequently, this chapter compares, contrasts, and synthesizes the various perspectives on magical thinking that can inform the research objective pursued in this dissertation. The first section examines the conceptual domain of magical thinking; a formal definition and key characteristics of magical thinking are proposed and positioned against major perspectives in the literature. Next, a culturally-based framework of magical thinking is presented as an analytical lens to study consumer coping. Finally, the insight to be gained from a magical thinking perspective of consumer coping is discussed. The chapter thus lays the conceptual foundation from which we can further cultivate our understanding of the role of magical thinking in consumer coping.

3.1 What is Magical Thinking?

Several definitions of magical thinking have been proposed in the psychological, anthropological, and sociological literatures, reflecting various research interests and perspectives on the phenomenon. As illustrated in Table 3.1, the magical thinking construct is most often used in the field of psychology, where it is defined as a belief or set of beliefs in various phenomena and causal principles that contradict scientific knowledge (Eckblad and Chapman 1983; Hippler 1977; Rosengren and Hickling 2000; Shafir and Tversky 1992; Wilder 1975; Zusne and Jones 1989). In contrast, sociologists and anthropologists usually study the construct of magic, which they define in terms of behaviors and rituals that draw on mystical elements to influence desired
Nevertheless, early research in these fields sometimes defined magic as an inferior mode of
thought (e.g., Frazer 1935 [1890]; Tylor 1958 [1871]), a definition that overlaps with
psychological conceptualizations of magical thinking.

Adding to the difficulty of circumscribing the conceptual domain of magical thinking, is
the fact that terms such as ‘magical thinking,’ ‘magic,’ ‘fantastical thinking,’ and ‘superstition’
are often used interchangeably. For instance, Nemeroff and Rozin (2000) employ the label
“magic” to refer to beliefs that contradict the contemporary understanding of science, a definition
usually associated with magical thinking. Furthermore, some definitions consist of a list of
phenomena illustrative of magical thinking rather than a description of the construct itself (e.g.,
Hippler 1977; Zusne and Jones 1989). Acknowledging the diversity and ambiguity in
conceptualizations of magic and related constructs, Tambiah (1985) speaks of “that problematical
entity which writers have (loosely) labeled ‘magic’” (p.2).

Table 3-1: Definitions of Magical Thinking and Related Constructs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUTHORS</th>
<th>FIELD</th>
<th>CONSTRUCT</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adorno et al. (1950)</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Superstition</td>
<td>Beliefs in mystical or fantastical determinants of the individual fate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albas &amp; Albas (1989)</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>Magic</td>
<td>Behavior directed toward achieving an outcome, involving many everyday and commonplace acts, but seeming to rely for success on some mystical element.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arnould &amp; Price (1993)</td>
<td>Consumer research</td>
<td>River magic</td>
<td>Concerns itself with the relationship between humans and the world and consists of ritualized acts directed toward concrete ends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Achieving the appearance of control in the absence of control.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Belief and reported experiences in forms of causation that by conventional standards are invalid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Field</td>
<td>Concept</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
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<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
2. Belief that words contain power over the physical universe and belief in projected feelings as concrete or spiritual beings with the power to affect the world, as well as the belief in the capacity of another human, or the self, to affect the universe through verbal commands or affecto-motor evocations. |
| Jahoda (1969)                   | Psychology     | Superstition             | Kind of belief and action a reasonable present-day man in present-day Western society would regard as being ‘superstitious’. It encompasses the following categories:  
1. Superstition (e.g., magic, sorcery, witchcraft)  
2. Other socially shared superstition, which largely concern good and bad luck (e.g., breaking mirrors brings bad luck)  
3. ‘Occult’ experiences of individuals (e.g., ESP, haunted houses)  
4. Personal superstition (e.g., using a particular pen to ensure success) |
<p>| Johnson (1997)                  | Psychology     | Fantastical (magical)    | Construction of alternative realities which intentionally violate the intuitive constraints of our ordinary understanding. Such thinking is purposely fantastic. People intentionally try to construct models of reality that go beyond their ordinary understanding. |
| Kapferer (1997)                 | Anthropology   | Magic                    | Deals with the forces of intentionality and its transmutations that are at the heart of the creation by human beings of their social and political worlds. |
| Marmor (1956)                   | Psychiatry     | Superstition             | Beliefs of practices groundless in themselves and inconsistent with the degree of enlightenment reached by the community to which it belongs. |
| Nemeroff &amp; Rozin (2000)         | Psychology     | Magic                    | Magic is defined in terms of belief or set of beliefs that may be held at different levels of explicitness and do not generally make sense in terms of the contemporary understanding of science. Magic relies on subjective and involve the assumption of correspondence between the subjective world and the world of reality. |
| Peele (1982)                    | Psychology     | Magical solution to life | Solution that acts to alleviate tension in the face of a problem, but does nothing to alleviate the problem. |
| Rosengren &amp; Hickling (2000)     | Psychology     | Magical thinking         | Encompasses errors in everyday causal attribution, such as (1) realism – i.e., inappropriate causal inferences between the mind and the world, and (2) participation – i.e., unwarranted causal inferences linking merely coincidental events. |
| Rothbart &amp; Snyder (1970)        | Psychology     | Magical thinking         | Implies a causal link between the wish and the outcome. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shafir &amp; Tversky (1992)</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Magical thinking</td>
<td>Erroneous belief that one can influence an outcome by some symbolic or other indirect act even though the act has no causal link to the outcome.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Quasi-magical thinking</td>
<td>Cases in which people act as if they erroneously believe that their action influences the outcome, even though they do not really hold that belief.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stivers (1999)</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>Magic</td>
<td>Set of words and practices that are believed to influence or affect a desired outcome. The relationship is symbolic rather than objective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilder (1975)</td>
<td>Psychology (psychotherapy)</td>
<td>Magical thinking</td>
<td>Thinking in terms of absolutes, in terms of omnipotence and omniscience, in terms of magic certainties. It is a world of absolute, though often mysterious justice. There is the belief in the magic power of words, gestures, actions and inactions, or thoughts, fantasies, and wishes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wittkower &amp; Weidman (1973)</td>
<td>Psychoanalytic and anthropology</td>
<td>Magical beliefs</td>
<td>Conscious or unconscious belief or conviction of having power over or mastery of things by thought processes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woolley (1997)</td>
<td>Psychology (developmental)</td>
<td>Fantastical (magical) thinking</td>
<td>Ways of reasoning about the world that violate known physical principles. To ‘think fantastically’ is a process whereby one relies on a set of principles that violate accepted views of reality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Thinking about magic</td>
<td>Knowledge of the real and fantastical status of a variety of fantastical entities. To ‘think about fantasy’ refers to the content of beliefs, beliefs about the real versus fantastical nature of various entities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zusne &amp; Jones (1989)</td>
<td>Psychology (anomalistic)</td>
<td>Magical thinking</td>
<td>Belief (a) that a transfer of energy or information between physical systems may take place solely because of their similarity or contiguity in time and space, or (b) that one’s thoughts, words, or actions can achieve specific physical effects in a manner not governed by the principles of ordinary transmission of energy or information. Meaning is externalized or reified and taken to be causal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Drawing from multi-disciplinary perspectives, I broadly define magical thinking as creating or invoking ‘extraordinary’ connections – symbolic relationships founded on a belief or intuition in the presence of mystical forces in the world – in order to understand, predict, or influence events and I identify three key characteristics of magical thinking: (1) magical thinking constitutes an instrumental and expressive process; (2) magical thinking coexists with scientific thinking; and (3) forms and manifestations of magical thinking are tied to dynamic cultural meanings and, more specifically, to the domain of the sacred.
Prior to exploring these three constituting characteristics of magical thinking, it is necessary to briefly address the distinction between magical thinking and related constructs. As mentioned above, the terms magical thinking, magic, or magical acts are often used interchangeably in the literature. The concept of magic is thus alternatively defined as a worldview or an orientation to reality (Kapferer 1997; Tambiah 1990), a set of beliefs (Bolton et al. 2002; Nemeroff and Rozin 2000), or a behavior (Albas and Albas 1989). Similarly, magical thinking has been conceptualized in terms of beliefs (Hippler 1977; Wilder 1975; Zusne and Jones 1989), experience (Eckblad and Chapman 1983), or a way of thinking that violates scientific causality either intentionally (Johnson 1997) or by error (Rosengren and Hickling 2000; Woolley 1997). As we will see, this diversity is attributable to the multi-disciplinary nature of research on the subject as well as contrasting views regarding the psychological versus cultural foundation of magic and magical thinking.

Magic is defined here as a worldview or orientation to reality composed of beliefs – called magical beliefs – and intuitions regarding the nature of the world and reality; it is a world ruled by a mystical order and inhabited by supernatural forces (Tambiah 1990). In contrast, magical thinking refers to a meaning-making process based on symbolic connections that reflect a magical orientation to reality, and magical practice corresponds to ritualized acts. Through magical thinking and magical practice, people summon mysterious forces to achieved desired ends.

### 3.1.1 Magical Thinking is an Instrumental and Expressive Process

Research relevant to the study of magical thinking originates in the field of anthropology with Tylor’s (1958 [1871]) and Frazer’s (1935 [1890]) work on magic in primitive societies. Both researchers conceptualized magic as an inferior mode of thought characteristic of pre-scientific societies; for them, magic is “pseudo-science” (Tylor 1958 [1871]), the “bastard sister of science”
(Frazer 1935 [1890]). Tylor (1958 [1871]) first proposed that magic arises from the erroneous application of a fundamental process of the mind, namely the principle of *association of ideas*. This error consists in confusing contingent associative relations for causal relations or, following Tylor’s celebrated phrase, in “mistaking an ideal connection for a real one.”

In contrast to Tylor and Frazer’s depiction of magic as pseudo-science resulting from the misapplication of causal principles, other researchers have drawn the demarcation between magic and science in terms of a sacred versus profane distinction. Hence, Durkheim (1965 [1912]) argued that science is a profane activity whereas religion and magic are both associated with the sphere of the sacred, defined as a domain pertaining to the supernatural and the mysterious, filled with the presence of divinity and subject to prohibition. Consequently, employing scientific approaches to evaluate magic may unduly result in seeing magic as a mistake rather than recognizing its creative, constructive dimension (Tambiah 1985).

Reconciling these perspectives, Tambiah (1990) suggests that the unique character of magic lies in its “dual structure” in that magic assumes an instrumental function in attempting to understand and influence the world (like science) while possessing an expressive function through its link to the sacred (like religion):

> On the one hand, it seems to imitate the logic of technical/technological action that seeks to transform nature or the world of natural things and manifestations. On the other hand, its structure is also transparently rhetorical and performative (in that it consists of acts to create effects on human actors according to accepted social conventions). (p.82)

As a meaning-making activity that invokes a magic worldview, magical thinking is also characterized by this dual structure that allies instrumental and expressive functions. Magical thinking is an instrumental process because it is directed at understanding, predicting, or influencing events in the world. In that respect, magical thinking is akin to scientific thinking –
also called rational thinking or logical thinking – which pursues similar goals. To reach these instrumental ends, magical thinking and scientific thinking both involve the creation and use of ‘connections’, that is, the establishment of relationships between different events, people, objects, actions, etc. However, the nature of the connections involved in scientific and magical thinking are different because they are founded on distinct worldviews, different sets of assumptions regarding the nature of the world and reality (see figure 3.1).

A scientific worldview construes the world as operating according to physical laws and randomness. Consequently, scientific thinking involves objective, causal connections based on physical processes such as energy transfer and information transmission (Zusne and Jones 1989). These connections can further contain an element of chance, probability, or randomness. For instance, a gambler adopting scientific thinking would understand the outcomes of the game in terms of the probabilities and randomness.

In contrast, a magical worldview is founded on the principle of participation and the belief that the world is governed by a mystical order. First, the principle of participation stipulates that all beings and things form a whole and that no rigid boundary exists between the mental and the physical, between the subjective and the objective (Levy-Bruhl 1923; Piaget 1929; Tambiah 1990). Participation also entails that imperceptible forces or essences can influence outcomes in the world: “The fundamental premise of those who believe in a magical-religious universe is their conviction that there are hidden and unseen powers transcending the world, yet responsible for what occurs within it. […] It presupposes that there are exceptions to materialistic or physical causality.” (Kurtz 1991, p.454). Second, the notion of a mystical order of the world – which has also been labeled ‘myth of meaningfulness’ (Baumeister 1991), ‘belief in a just world’ (Lerner 1980), or ‘belief in a fully determined world’ (Lesser and Paisner 1985) – implies that there is a meaningful explanation for events. In a meaningful world, there is no room for probability or
randomness; all events are assumed to be part of some mystical order. Thus, magical thinking involves symbolic, *extraordinary* connections in which meaning is reified so that subjective states (e.g., desire, thoughts, emotions, etc.) are associated with objective outcomes. For instance, a gambler who engages in magical thinking might conceive that visualizing a certain number in his mind increases the chances of that number appearing in a game of roulette or that he deserves a win after a series of losses.

**Figure 3-1: Magical Thinking versus Scientific Thinking**

Hence, whereas scientific thinking seeks to understand the world objectively ‘as it is’, in a manner devoid of emotion and desires, magical thinking invokes mystical forces to allow us to
experience the world as related to our emotion and desires. This corresponds to the expressive aspect of magical thinking. Magical thinking is unique in that it represents an attempt to act on events in the world while transcending the mundane constraints of ‘reality’ – constraints of the physical world, constraints of time and space, constraints of our physical body.

**3.1.2 Magical Thinking Coexists with Scientific Thinking**

Since magic was initially seen as a precursor of science (e.g., Frazer 1935 [1890]; Tylor 1958 [1871]), researchers often predicted that it would disappear with the progressive development of the scientific mentality among societies, a hypothesis that has been labeled ‘secularization thesis’ (Sharot 1989). These researchers interpreted the expression of magic in contemporary Western civilization as a paradoxical survival of primitive behaviors that were bound to disappear. Even researchers who recognized the sacred characteristic of magic as distinct from science (e.g., Durkheim, Mauss) sometimes adopted a thesis of development from primitive (magical) to modern (scientific) thought.

Pioneering theories of child development in psychology (Freud 1950 [1913]; Piaget 1929) broadly followed the evolutionary sequence proposed by early anthropologists, in which magical thinking represents a pre-scientific stage. This position is predicated on the idea that individual development (ontogeny) mimics the evolution of mankind (phylogeny). For Piaget, magical thinking is one component of nonnaturalistic thought, the fundamental thought process characteristic of the preoperational stage. It is defined in terms of ‘participation’, or the belief that one can control the fate of external objects and events through various thoughts and symbolic actions; likewise, these events and objects could influence each other. Piaget traces magical thought directly to egocentricism in the following manner: “[F]rom the moment the child confuses thought, or names, etc., with things, though not realizing the internal subjective nature of the act of thinking, it becomes natural for him to use these names or thoughts to influence
things.” Much like early anthropological models, this approach thus construes magical thinking as an erroneous application of basic thought processes that are replaced with the principles of scientific causality through cognitive development and education. When magical thinking is manifest in adults, it is interpreted as a form of ‘regression’ to primitive thought patterns.

In contrast to this replacement model predicting the disappearance of magic with the advance of science, contemporary researchers in anthropology and psychology often question the evolutionary perspective that predicts the disappearance of magical thinking with cognitive development and the acquisition of scientific thinking. According to the coexistence model, these domains coexist in all societies (Subbotsky 2004; Tambiah 1990; Zusne and Jones 1989). This perspective dates back to Levy-Bruhl who proposed that mystical (magical) and causal (scientific) mentalities coexist in the human mind everywhere and across time, although contextual factors may encourage the expression of one over the other. Tambiah (1990) asserts that the context in which different orientations to the world – i.e., causal (scientific) versus participatory (magical, religious) operate, and the factors prompting a switch from one to the other, require further study: “[I]t is this context in which sacred attitudes are invoked and in which code switching occurs that remains for us still a major phenomenon to interpret” (p.92)

Although the persistence of magical thinking in contemporary adults is still largely understood as a cognitive distortion or fallacious reasoning (Alcock 1995; Bolton et al. 2002; Comer and Nemeroft 2000; Shermer 2002), some researchers criticize this prevalent view and advocate further examination of the positive, constructive aspects of magical thinking (Harris 1997; Rosengren and Hickling 2000). For instance, Johnson (1997) proposes a definition of magical (fantastical) thinking as “the construction of alternative realities which intentionally violate the intuitive constraints of our ordinary understanding” (p.1025) The volitional element of this definition contrasts with traditional conceptualizations of magical thinking as reasoning
without knowledge or on the basis of erroneous beliefs (Shafir and Tversky 1992; Woolley 1997). A recent study (Subbotsky 2005) suggests that magical thinking not only coexists with rational thinking but even develops with age. Indeed, the belief that magic powers can affect fantastic and personally significant imagined objects was observed in adults but not in children. Furthermore, Arnould, Price and Otnes (1999) note that “[m]agical thinking often works in tandem with scientific thought to process information and solve problems” (p.35) and that scientific progress often originates in magical activity. However, Subbotsky and Quinteros (2002) remind us that “there is a crucial difference between explanations in terms of ‘physical yet unknown’ forces and in terms of ‘magical forces’” (p.524).

In this research, I distinguish magical thinking from scientific thinking on the basis of the nature of the connections involved. Hence, magical thinking is characterized by symbolic connections based on reification of meaning and participation within a world inhabited by supernatural forces and operating according to some mystical order. True to the ontological assumptions that underlie research conducted within Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Hudson and Ozanne 1988), this conceptualization recognizes reality as contextual, multiple, and socially constructed. This approach thus contrasts with conceptualizations of magical thinking in terms of erroneous beliefs or fallacious reasoning, which are premised on the existence of a single, objective reality.

3.1.3 Magical Thinking is Tied to Cultural Meanings

As discussed above, early anthropologists (e.g., Tylor, Frazer) believed that magic arose from a general feature of the human mind, namely its propensity towards association of ideas. For them, magic is thus a psychological phenomenon, a mentality; this mentality is believed to be universal and a function of our brain and nervous system (Alcock 1995). Other researchers (i.e., Durkheim, Levy-Bruhl), have conceptualized magic (as well as science and religion) as a socially
constructed meaning system that constitutes a social/cultural phenomenon, an orientation to the
world.

Conceptualizations of magic and magical thinking as a psychological versus social
phenomenon still co-exist in the literature but they are not necessarily irreconcilable: “We believe
that magical thinking is universal in adults; although the specific content is filled in by one’s
culture, the general forms are characteristic of the human mind” (Nemeroff and Rozin 2000). So
while magical thinking may be “part of a wider disposition to invoke a hidden causal structure
beneath the surface appearance of phenomena” (Harris 1997, p.219), its forms and manifestations
are tied to cultural meanings and, more specifically, to the domain of the sacred (Malinowski
1954; Stivers 1999). In that sense, magic is akin to religion in that it serves a symbolic, expressive
function (Skorupski 1976; Tambiah 1990).

The present research seeks to examine magical thinking as a meaning-making coping
resource. To this end, the relationship between magical thinking and cultural meanings, including
sacred meaning, will be examined in greater detail in the next section with the goal of articulating
a framework that will guide empirical investigation.

3.2 A Culturally-Based Theory of Magic and Magical Thinking

Sociologist Richard Stivers (1999) analyzed the relationship between magic and cultural
meanings to propose that the dominant form of magic changes over time because it is tied to
dynamic cultural meaning systems and, specifically, to the realm of the sacred. Thus, magic “does
not operate according to a single principle or logic. [It] changes according to what is perceived to
be sacred” (Stivers 1999, p.28). Stivers developed a sociological theory of magic that combines
Durkheim’s proposition that magic belongs to the realm of the sacred with Jacques Ellul’s theory
of three milieux. The theory posits that the realm of the sacred is dynamic and tied to the
dominant meaning system of a given historical period called its milieu. The sacred is further
organized around a set of polarities that represent the defining tensions in a society at a certain point in time. In this context, magic is defined as:

a set of words and practices that are believed to influence or effect a desired outcome. The relationship is symbolic rather than objective. […] The principle by which magic is believed to act is an imitation of the principle by which one’s life-milieu operates. The sacred power of the milieu is thought to be contained in the magical practice, thus making the magical practice a more or less operational indicator of the desired outcome. (Stivers 1999, p.41-42)

Following Ellul, Stivers (1999) demarcated three historical periods characterized by distinct milieus – the milieus of nature, society, and technology. What is perceived to be sacred is different in each milieu; consequently, the principle by which magic is believed to operate is also unique to a given milieu.

In the present research, I adopt Stiver’s (1999) theory of magic as an organizing framework to examine the role of magical thinking in consumer coping. Recall that magical thinking was conceptualized as a meaning-making process based on symbolic connections that draw on magic as a worldview. Hence, Stivers’ (1999) framework provides a useful starting point to cultivate our understanding of magical thinking as a coping resource by providing a meaning-based explanation of magical thinking that explicitly considers the role of dynamic cultural meanings. This framework also facilitates the integration of various forms of magical thinking described in the literature. The three principles of magic developed in Stivers’ (1999) framework and links to related constructs in the literature are summarized in Table 3.2 and discussed next.
Table 3-2: Principles of Magic in the Milieu of Nature, Society, and Technology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principles of magic*</th>
<th>Description*</th>
<th>Milieu*</th>
<th>Related constructs</th>
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| Creative persuasion  | Magic is a form of participation in the world that operates through persuasion of mysterious forces residing in nature. | Milieu of nature:  
  - Nature is an undivided totality.  
  - Polarities of life and death. | · New Agers’ belief in a magical energy (Heelas 1996; Vyse 1997)  
  · River magic (Arnould and Price 1993; Arnould et al. 1999) |
| Retribution          | Magic seeks to control nature through moral actions, that is, the punishment of evil deed and the reward of good deed. | Milieu of society:  
  - This is a moral universe.  
  - Polarities of good and evil (order and disorder) | · Belief that emotion management influences illness outcome (Rosenberg 1997; Salander 2000)  
  · Contagion of moral properties (Comer and Nemeroff 2000) |
| Efficient causality  | Magic is an imitation of technology or a compensation for it. | Milieu of technology:  
  - Science establishes the causal laws according to which it is believed nature and society are organized, and technology exploits them in the interest of efficiency.  
  - Polarities of efficiency and inefficiency | · ‘McDonald’s magical thought’ in coping with death and grief (Fogarty 2000)  
  · Magical solutions (Peele 1982)  
  · Cinderella syndrome (Marshall and Larimer 1995) |

*Source: Stivers (1999)

3.2.1 Magic as Creative Persuasion

The first historical period in Stivers’ framework, illustrated in table 3.2, is situated in prehistoric times, when the sacred is defined by nature. This is a world of participation where nature is seen as an undivided totality; there is no boundary between nature and humans or between the objective and the subjective. In this context, magic operates under the principles of creative persuasion, a concept that is consistent with interpretations of magic as performative actions (Tambiah 1985) arising from a sense of unity with nature:

Humans did not control the power of nature but acted as its agents; hence, the necessity of persuasion as a way of attempting...
to realize the collective wishes of the group. Humans helped to create the world they lived in, but not in any automatic or causal way; for the power they attempted to make work on their behalf was mysterious and beyond their control. Magic in the milieu of nature was based on the principle of persuasion in which humans participated in creating that for which they wished (Stivers 1999, p.31).

Explanations of magic in terms of participation with mysterious forces inhabiting nature are the most frequent in the literature. Indeed, sympathetic magic, which has been described as the most prototypical account of magic (Nemeroff and Rozin 2000), was elaborated by Frazer’s (1935 [1890]) observations of primitive tribes living in an environment akin to the milieu of nature. Sympathetic magic rests on two basic principles: similarity and contagion. The law of similarity can be summarized as “appearance equals reality.” According to this law, objects that resemble one another at a superficial level also share deeper properties. The law of contagion stipulates that physical contact between two objects results in the transfer of some physical, mental, or moral properties (also called ‘essence’) from one to the other. Further, the contact between the two objects may be mediated through a third one (called ‘vehicle’) that is in contact with both objects simultaneously or successively. In psychology, sympathetic magic is largely understood as erroneous causal associations that are a function of our brain and nervous system structure, as well as related cognitive processes (e.g., Alcock 1995; Vyse 1997). In contrast, Tambiah (1985, 1990, 1996) proposes that similarity and contagion reflect a participative orientation to reality that is distinct from causality:

My project and strategy of attempting to normalize certain processes of association, previously denigrated or dismissed as only characteristic of occult and magical thought is linked to the proposal that we all participate in multiple orientations to the world, or in many “ways of world making” (to use Nelson Goodman’s phrase). These orderings are incommensurable with scientific rationality in the sense that they can neither be reduced nor meaningfully judged against that yardstick (Tambiah 1990, p.48).
Participation with nature is still a powerful source of magical consumption experiences today. For instance, Arnould and colleagues (Arnould and Price 1993; Arnould, Price and Otnes 1998, 1999) eloquently describe how consumers engage in ritualized acts during white-water river rafting expeditions to activate magical forces in nature that elicit hope and optimism. Similarly, beliefs in the magical healing power of nature are prominent in Thompson and Troester’s (2002) analysis of natural health practices.

### 3.2.2 Magic as Retribution

The second period in Stivers’ (1999) framework corresponds to the milieu of society and spreads from the Neolithic era to World War II. As described in table 3.2, the sacred during this period is articulated around the poles of good and evil and magic follows the principle of retribution wherein evil deeds are punished and good deeds are rewarded. A key difference in this milieu is the delineation of a boundary between nature and humans. Consequently, magic loses its creative aspect and acquires a dimension of control. Magic as retribution is thus consistent with accounts of the individualistic character of magic (e.g., Durkheim 1965, Mauss 1972) and characterizations of magical thinking as ‘achieving control in the absence of control’ (Bolton et al. 2002).

The principle of magical thinking as retribution is illustrated in Salander’s (2000) description of a young woman’s efforts to cope with life following a successful bone-marrow transplant. This young woman treated her illness as a reified entity and sought to negotiate it through a series of self-imposed injunctions: “Cancer is like a spirit you have to try to cheat. If I become a teacher instead of a cancer doctor, I won’t be fighting it and then there might not be any revenge” (p.42). Similarly, Comer and Nemeroff (2000) assessed adolescents’ perceptions of risk for casual versus regular sexual partners. Subjects asked to assess the risk of AIDS transmission employed an emotionally based strategy in rating perceived risk and engaged in magical thinking
by assuming that emotional safety – based on moral properties they associate with a given partner – determined physical safety. In another domain, Lindeman, Keskivaara and Roschier (2000) examined magical beliefs about food and health and found that these beliefs are more prevalent when food and health-related issues are moralized and when individuals are emotionally involved in eating or health.

### 3.2.3 Magic as Efficient Causality

The bulk of Stivers’ (1999) reflection focuses on understanding the third period that began after World War II with the apparition of television and computers and continues today. As indicated in table 3.2, technology occupies a sacred position in this era and magical thinking operates under the principle of **efficient causality**, that is, as imitation of technology or as a compensation for its impact. According to Stivers (1999), the dominant meaning system in the milieu of technology is organized around the poles of efficiency and inefficiency and is embodied in consumer goods. The tension between the two poles is managed through excessive experimental consumption, a practice founded on the belief that technological products can solve our problems and provide permanent happiness.

Stivers’ (1999) analysis of magic as efficient causality resonates with other interpretations that establish a close relationship between magic, marketing, and consumption. For instance, Berman (1981) asserts that contemporary life is characterized by a loss of meaning linked to the scientific revolution, which has led to the ‘disenchantment of nature’: “Scientific consciousness is alienated consciousness: there is no ecstatic merger with nature, but rather total separation from it” (p.17). The scientific revolution has also hindered the institution of community in favor of an ideology of individual control where the self is bounded and masterful. This situation, in turn, leads to a loss of shared meaning and values, and a sense of alienation and futility that ultimately propels individuals in a desperate search for meaning (Arnold, Price and
Otnes 1998; Baumeister 1991; Brandt 1997; Cushman 1990; Rosenberg 1997). The marketing system fills this void by offering a lifestyle solution as pseudo culture, a transformation, a refuge where “the customer’s problems will simply disappear when the magical transfer takes place” (Cushman 1990, p.605). Similarly, Marshal and Larimer (1995) note that modern technology—through such things as television programs, political promises, and lottery promotions—further promises low-effort gains and technological miracles that reinforce instant gratification and, consequently, a propensity to believe in magical solutions to life’s problems.

The decreasing role of community in modernity and the associated emphasis on individual control also exacerbate the anxiety traditionally experienced in certain situations and, ultimately, may contribute to magical thinking. For example, Fogarty (2000) proposes that the funeral process in North America stimulates the use of magical thinking in coping with grief by insulating the bereaved from the reality of death and from social support, and by discouraging emotional expressions of grief. Instead, the bereaved is offered a set of quick fixes, such as being admonished to “just put it out of your mind,” that illustrate the ‘McDonald’s magical thought’ pervading our society. A similar process characterizes contemporary approaches to health, where a risk reduction ideology, combined with moralization of health issues, places a heavy burden of responsibility for disease on individuals and encourages magical solutions (Brandt 1997; Rosenberg 1997; Thomas 1997).

3.2.4 Integration

In sum, Stivers (1999) proposes that magic does not constitute a uniform worldview but that its principles change according to what is perceived to be sacred in a given cultural context. Let’s briefly review the three principles of magic identified in Stivers’ (1999) framework and derive implications for our understanding of magical thinking. According to the first principle of creative persuasion, magic is a form of participation in a world where there is no boundary
between nature and humans. Magical thinking in this context thus invokes imminent forces that reside in nature and the connections involved conflate the objective and the subjective. Second, the principle of retribution constructs magic as a form of control through moral actions. Consequently, magical thinking draws on a moral universe in which good deeds are rewarded and evil ones punished. Finally, magic based on the principle of efficient causality operates as an imitation of technology or a compensation for its effects. In this context, magical thinking evokes a technological utopia.

Stivers (1999) associates each principle of magic with a specific historical period, based on the assumption that each period corresponds to a dominant cultural meaning system. He nevertheless acknowledges that a given form of magic persists in subsequent milieus, albeit in a secondary, indirect manner. Following the theoretical perspective of Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005), I suspend this assumption that specific historic periods are characterized by homogeneous meaning to examine magical thinking in relation to heterogeneously distributed cultural meanings. Hence, I employ Stivers’ (1999) framework as a way to theoretically link the concepts of magical thinking as meaning-making with magic as a worldview while allowing for one or several principles of magic to emerge in my investigation.

3.3 Magical Thinking and Consumer Coping

The previous section presented a framework in which different cultural sources of sacred meanings fleshed out the conceptual domain of magical thinking in terms of three principles: creative persuasion, retribution, and efficient causality. These principles constitute a theoretical foundation from which we can cultivate our understanding of magical thinking in consumer coping. The eventual contributions of this exercise are premised on the possibility for the concept of magical thinking to provide fresh insight on the domain of consumer coping. To this end, I now contrast the principles of creative persuasion, retribution, and efficient causality with the
related concepts of agency, morality, and technology found in the Consumer Cultural Theory literature to suggest ways in which magical thinking can further illuminate our understanding of consumer coping.

3.3.1 Creative Persuasion and Consumer Agency

Magical thinking speaks to the role of agency in consumer coping. Conceptualizations of magical thinking as a cognitive error resonate with a “critical view” of agency, which “assumes that consumers are largely unaware, irrational, passive, and emotional, a blindly conformist mass easily duped by the media” (Kozinets et al. 2004, p. 660). In contrast to this interpretation, others have proposed that magical thinking is essentially a creative, agentic process, “the construction of alternative realities which intentionally violate the intuitive constraints of our ordinary understanding” (Johnson 1997, p.1025).

The magical principles of participation and creative persuasion propose an intermediary position in which consumer agency is enacted within a world inhabited by mysterious forces that can be persuaded to achieve desired ends. This perspective aligns with a “celebratory view” of agency in which “consumers assert their agency over marketer-determined identities, practices, and meanings by formulating ‘creative,’ subversive, idiosyncratic, communally relevant, or resistant alternatives, or by rejecting marketing impositions outright” (Kozinets et al. 2004, p.660). Creativity in magical thinking allows a reordering of experience and the world itself (Rosaldo 1975), a transformation of self, and the creation of new meanings and categories of meanings, and the semantic conditions for dealing with reality (Csordas 1997). In a magical worldview inhabited by mysterious forces, how do consumers arbitrate between their own agency and the power inherent in these supernatural forces?

To date, the celebratory view of consumer agency has largely been developed within hedonic, fictionally-oriented marketing settings (e.g., Grayson and Martinec 2004; Kozinets et al. 2004).
This research explores how consumers find freedom from marketers’ control of reality, exerted through control of the media and spectacles (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). For instance, Rose and Wood (2005) examine how consumers cope with paradoxes of reality television in the process of constructing an authentic experience. The focus thus lies in understanding how consumers cope with marketers’ persuasion attempts. The principle of creative persuasion, on the other hand, compels us to consider how consumers also engage in persuasion efforts, conjuring mysterious forces to assist them in coping with stressful events.

3.3.2 Retribution and Morality

The principle of retribution implies that consumers invoke moral beliefs to understand and cope with stressful events as they negotiate the tension between good and evil. Moral beliefs constitute important goals driving consumer behavior. For example, Belk, Ger and Askegaard (2003) find that consumer desire is shaped and sustained by the tension between seduction and morality. To cope with this tension, consumers moderate their impulse to succumb to seduction in order to make their consumption moral. Similarly, Kozinets and Handelman (2004) describe how moral goals guide consumer activists in their attempts to transform the pervading culture of consumption. In these situations, morality serves as a goal, an end value that shapes consumption activities. Magical thinking suggests that consumers may also use morality as a means to an end, invoking moral principles in order to precipitate a desired outcome.

The relationship between stress and magical thinking is often explicated in terms of need for control. Researchers assert that both uncertainty and stress threaten perceptions of control and people attempt to regain control through the use of magical thinking (Keinan 1994, 2002; Malinowski 1954; Zusne and Jones 1989). In these frameworks, magical thinking is thus understood as a form of secondary control, that is, an attempt to gain a feeling of control in situations where actual control is perceived as unattainable (Case et al. 2004).
retribution is consistent with an individualistic, control-oriented view of magical thinking. However, retribution entails that control is achieved through moral action, which implies that notions of moral responsibility coexist with desire for control in coping.

3.3.3 Efficient Causality and Technology

Magic is often understood in opposition to science. Arnould, Price and Otnes (1999) assert that the resurgence of magic in postmodernity is associated with consumers’ growing incredulity regarding the promises of science. Similarly, Thompson (2005) interprets practices of a natural birth community as a Romantic Utopia in which “the pastoral takes primacy over the industrial; the natural trumps the technological; the magical supersedes scientific rationality” (p. 246). Informants describe birth as a magical experience that “would be profaned by the technological interventions commonly employed in medically managed births” (p. 244).

In contrast, Stivers (1999) proposes that in the milieu of technology, science acquires a sacred dimension. According to the related principle of efficient causality, marketing activities may encourage the creation and diffusion of magical meanings that mimic the logic of technology. The principle of efficient causality thus encourages a re-conceptualization of the magic/nature versus science/technology dichotomy in consumers’ meaning-making activities.

Efficient causality is premised on the omnipotence of technology that is embodied in consumer goods (Stivers 1999) and expressed in a proclivity for magical solutions to life’s problems (Peele 1982). Efficient causality thus offers a theoretical lens for examining how consumers use products as magical coping resources. Furthermore, it promises to provide insight into consumers’ magical expectations of the process and outcomes associated with the coping strategies they adopt.
3.4 Conclusion

In the previous sections, the multi-disciplinary literature on magic and magical thinking has been reviewed with the goals of circumscribing the conceptual domain of magical thinking and identifying its key characteristics. A culturally-based theory of magic was presented as an umbrella to integrate different accounts of magical thinking and the principles of creative persuasion, retribution, and efficient causality were presented as avenues from which to cultivate our understanding of magical thinking in consumer coping. The next chapter describes the empirical research that was undertaken to explore these themes.
Chapter 4
Research Agenda

This chapter describes the empirical research undertaken to explore the role of magical thinking in consumer coping. First, conclusions from the previous literature review are summarized and research goals are outlined. Consumers’ efforts to control their weight are then presented as a relevant and rich context in which to cultivate our understanding of consumer coping. Finally, the research methodology is discussed.

4.1 Goals of the Research

A review of coping research suggests that there is an opportunity to gain further insight into the role of meaning in consumer coping by considering cultural as well as individual dimensions of meaning. The present dissertation addresses this issue by examining consumer coping through the analytical lens of magical thinking. Magical thinking occurs as consumers create or invoke extraordinary connections to understand, predict, or influence events in their lives. These connections are labeled ‘extraordinary’ because they entail symbolic relationships founded on a belief or intuition in the presence of mystical forces in the world and the possibility to summon these forces to achieve desired ends.

Hence, this research aims to understand magical thinking as a coping resource in consumption. The next section describes the context in which this investigation was conducted.

4.2 Weight Loss as a Research Context

A research context suitable to the objective pursued in this dissertation would possess certain characteristics. First, it should be a domain of consumption that has the potential to elicit stressful reactions in consumers. As discussed earlier, this is likely to occur in situations
involving outcomes that are highly important to the consumer. Stressful consumption situations will be further exacerbated when ways to secure the desired outcomes are limited or ambiguous.

Second, a desirable research context would exhibit elements related to the principles of magic presented above, such as magical solutions, to suggest a fertile cultural context in which to examine magical thinking. Based on these characteristics, consumers’ weight loss projects were selected as a research context. These activities represent an increasingly important topic for many consumers individually and at a societal level. Weight control activities also reveal rich and complex relationships with stress and coping.

4.2.1 Weight Loss Activities: An Important Consumption Phenomenon

The market for weight loss products is large and growing, due to the increase in obesity and to preoccupation with a cultural ideal of thinness. It constitutes an important yet under-researched area of consumption. First, weight loss activities represent a common consumption phenomenon with significant economic consequences: More than two-thirds of American adults are trying either to lose weight or to prevent weight gain (Bish et al. 2005; Kruger et al. 2004). To this end, they spend over $30 billion annually on weight management products and services – including diet foods, books, and programs (Cleland et al. 2002). The impact of this consumption phenomenon is far-reaching; for instance, Katz (2005) notes that “[t]he current popularity of carbohydrate-restricted diets for weight loss is little less than a national phenomenon and is literally reshaping the American food supply” (p. 67).

Second, weight loss is becoming an urgent concern for policy makers, as obesity is quickly growing to the status of international public threat. Led by the United States, the obesity ‘epidemic’ has spread to most developed countries and is rising fast in developing nations undergoing economic and cultural transitions (World Health Organization 1997). In Canada, nearly 50% of the population aged 20 to 64 is overweight or obese (Statistics Canada 2002b) and
37% of children aged 2 to 11 are overweight (Statistics Canada 2002a). In 2000, 9.3% of deaths in Canada were attributable to overweight and obesity, up from 5.1% in 1985 (Queen’s Journal 2004). The direct public costs of obesity represent around 7% of total health care costs in the United States and between 1% and 5% in Europe (Visscher and Seidell 2001). Identifying and implementing effective weight control solutions is thus becoming a critical objective for policy makers. Consumers looking for a solution to their weight management issues are often vulnerable to marketers’ claims; regulating weight loss advertising is thus another concern for policy makers. Indeed, a study found that as much as 55% of advertising for weight loss products and services contained false or unsupported efficacy claims (Cleland et al. 2002).

4.2.2 Weight loss, Stress, and Coping

Weight loss activities play a significant role in the lives of many consumers. The relationship among weight control activities, stress, and coping is a complex one, offering a rich context from which to develop our understanding of consumer coping.

4.2.2.1 Preoccupation with Weight as a Source of Stress

Being overweight or obese can be a stressful situation given the plethora of negative health consequences associated with this condition, including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, cancer, osteoarthritis, work disability, and sleep apnea (Visscher and Seidell 2001). The stressful nature of overweight is also linked to its social and psychological consequences. The stigma of obesity is well documented; overweight people are generally viewed as physically unattractive and undesirable (Puhl and Brownell 2001), a predicament for which they are often deemed responsible due to some character flaw, such as laziness, gluttony, or a lack of self-control (Allon 1981; Crandall and Schiffhauer 1998; DeJong 1980). The obesity stigma transcends negative evaluations by others as obese individuals are more likely than normal weight
persons to perceive that they are the target of multiple forms of discrimination: work-related, health care-related, and interpersonal discrimination (Carr and Frieman 2005).

Preoccupation with weight, however, is not the sole domain of the overweight and obese. For instance, a study reveals that 28.7% of American women within a healthy weight range report trying to lose weight (Serdula et al. 1999). This situation is often attributed to the pervasive culture of thinness. Studies suggest that the body size of cultural ideals of female bodies – as depicted by Playboy centerfolds and Miss America Pageant winners – have decreased significantly since the 1960s, to reach underweight levels based on the World Health Organization’s guidelines; in contrast, the average body weight of North American women aged 18 to 24 has increased during this period, with a growing proportion becoming overweight (Garner et al. 1980; Spitzer, Henderson, and Zivian 1999; Wiseman et al. 1992). Today, icons of the female physical ideal – models, actresses, and beauty pageant contestants – weigh on average 25% less than the average America woman (Poulton 1997). As a result, some consumers might perceive a widening gap between desired and actual self-image, possibly leading to feelings of stress and lack of self-efficacy in moving towards their weight goals. The ensuing frustration is illustrated in a survey (Garner 1997) in which 24% of female respondents said they would give up more than three years of their lives to achieve their weight goals.

4.2.2.2 Weight Loss Activities: Coping Strategy and Source of Stress

Consumers may choose to cope with a stressful weight surplus by engaging in weight loss activities such as dieting, exercising or surgery (Puhl and Brownell 2003). Such an attempt to eliminate the source of stress would constitute a problem-focused coping strategy and it seems to be a popular coping strategy in light of the large proportion of consumers trying to lose weight – between 38% and 46% of women and between 24% and 33% of men according to recent large-scale surveys of the U.S. population (Bish et al. 2005; Kruger et al. 2004). However, attempting
to lose weight may prove to be an additional source of stress given the lack of practical and
generalizable solutions to weight management and the confusion created by multiple competing
dietary claims, such as low-fat versus low-carbohydrate diets (Katz 2005). In other words,
consumers who look to weight control programs to cope with overweight or body image issues
are often confronted with additional sources of stress in the form of paradoxical, ambiguous, and
conflicting messages, as well as uncertain outcomes.

Consumers might also find that engaging in weight control activities represent a stressful
experience. For instance, studies suggest that the process of attempting weight loss through
dieting is associated with negative consequences, such as increased depression, low self-esteem,
and increased stress response (Green, Elliman and Kretsch 2005).

4.2.2.3 Impact of Stress on Eating Patterns

Research suggests that eating behavior sometimes represents a way to cope with stress,
with people consuming different quantities and types of food under stress. For instance, Oliver
and Wardle (1999) observed that students under stress report a change in their food intake, with
approximately equal numbers eating more and eating less. Interestingly, twice as many dieters as
nondieters reported increased intake under stress, a fact consistent with research suggesting that
‘restrained’ eating is a strong predictor of stress-induced eating in women (Greeno and Wing
1994). Freeman and Gil (2004) suggest that the relationship between stress and increased eating
is further influenced by the coping strategies adopted in reaction to stress. In a longitudinal study
of binge eaters, they found that avoidance coping was positively associated with a greater
likelihood of subsequent bingeing for women displaying low to average levels of dietary
restraints. On the other hand, coping by seeking social support lessened the occurrence of
bingeing episodes as a response to stress. Stress affects not only the quantity ingested but also the
type of food consumers select; people under stress tend to favor ‘comfort food’ (Epel et al. 2001)
or sweet and savory ‘snack-type’ foods (Oliver and Wardle 1999). For some consumers, stress thus appears to lead to increased food intake and a shift towards calorie-dense, nutritionally-poor food choices; consumers attempting to control their weight by restricting eating in the first place seem particularly prone to this coping behavior.

In sum, consumers’ weight loss activities constitute an important domain of consumption and a relevant context to further develop our understanding of consumer coping. The moralization of weight issues (Bordo 1993; Carr and Friedman 2005; DeJong 1980) and the prevalence of magical solutions to weight problems (Cleland et al. 1998) also suggest that a magical thinking perspective may offer a useful approach to tackle those questions.

### 4.3 Method

The present research seeks to examine how the analytical lens of magical thinking can help us further understand consumer coping; it can consequently be classified as discovery-oriented theory building (Wells 1993), an exercise which favors qualitative methods. Since the research is concerned with how individuals construct meaning and the role of meaning in consumer coping, a hermeneutic framework was adopted, which “interprets consumption meanings in relation to both a consumer’s sense of personal history and a broader narrative context of historically established cultural meanings” (Thompson 1997, p.439).

Coping research in psychology traditionally employs questionnaires – e.g., Ways of Coping Questionnaire (Folkman and Lazarus 1988); COPE (Carver, Scheir and Weintraub 1989); Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (Endler and Parker 1990). Narrative approaches, however, are increasingly recognized as a useful alternative to understand the person and what he or she is coping with, as well as uncovering ways of coping that are not included on inventories. Lazarus (2006) recently argued for qualitative approaches to the study of coping:
Even the most sophisticated coping questionnaires, however, are too narrowly focused and superficial to dominate research on coping for long. They fail to assess what needs to be known about the person and the situational context […] Above all, coping questionnaires exclude the relational meanings that a person constructs about an emotional encounter, which is the key influence on coping and its outcomes. […] the coping process should not be divorced from the person who is doing the coping and his or her situational context. Descriptions of the person should not be eschewed in favor of the reductive search for causal variables. (p.21)

The hermeneutic framework adopted in this research (Thompson 1997) not only affords the opportunity to develop thematic descriptions of individual meanings but it also examines the broader cultural context in which these meanings are embedded. This is consistent with the culturally-based view of magical thinking adopted here. Hermeneutical analysis interprets the stories consumers tell about their consumption experiences; hence, the data set consisted of consumer stories regarding their weight loss activities. These texts were generated through phenomenological interviews and blogs. The phenomenological interview establishes a dialogue between the researcher and an informant, with the goal of attaining a first-person description of a given domain of experience. Although the phenomenological interview is a particularly powerful method to obtain in-depth accounts of consumers’ experiences, other methods, such as analysis of written statements, are also well suited (Thompson 1997; Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989). Thus a sample of weight loss blogs was selected as a second set of data. A blog, short for weblog, is a personal journal that is made publicly available on the web. The use of personal journals is a useful approach in interpretive consumer research – e.g., Belk, Ger and Askegaard’s (2003) study of consumer desire; Rose and Wood’s (2005) study of the consumption of authenticity. At the same time, consumer researchers increasingly recognize the potential of Internet as a useful context to observe consumer behavior in an efficient, unobtrusive manner (Kozinets 2002). Blog analysis combines these two approaches. In particular, numerous weight loss blogs are published
that provide rich descriptions of consumers’ experiences. Compared to interviews, blogs record a consumer’s story as it unfolds, through multiple entries over extended periods of time, instead of relying on recall of past experiences. The main drawback in using blogs as a source of consumption stories lies in the absence of dialogue between the researcher and informant. Consequently, certain blogs may describe weight control activities in great detail but provide little information on the consumer’s background, interests, and life goals. We can circumvent this limitation by establishing certain criteria for blog selection.

Following interpretivist research conventions, the sampling was purposeful. The aim was not to obtain a statistically representative sample; rather, I sought variance in terms of (1) consumers’ weight-related goals – e.g., losing a small versus a large amount of weight, and (2) weight loss products and services used – e.g., structured versus unstructured programs, diet versus exercise. Only women were recruited as informants in an effort to control for the anticipated effect of gender variations in the meaning and importance of weight as well as weight control practices. Indeed, men are less likely than women to diet or be concerned about their weight (Fallon 1990, 1994). A recent survey of the American population (Kruger et al. 2004) reveals that weight loss activities are more prevalent among women: 38% of women are trying to lose weight compared to 24% of men. Furthermore, 24% of normal weight women are trying to lose weight compared to 6% of normal weight men. This is congruent with observations of the anxiety women experience from exposure to media-portrayed ideals of a thin body (Monro and Huon 2005; Park 2005) and the contradictory social imperatives to consume while controlling consumption through diet and exercise (Bordo 1993). Women and men not only tend to develop different relationships to their body, they also display different food-related behaviors. In particular, women tend to report more stress-induced eating than men (Greeno and Wing 1994). Stress-induced eating in women is also associated with negative mood (Epel et al. 2001). A study
(Dubé, Lebel and Lu 2005) indicates that women’s consumption of comfort food is triggered by negative emotions whereas men’s consumption is motivated by positive emotions. Finally, Kruger et al.’s (2004) study also suggests important differences in weight loss practices between men and women: Women report more instances of eating fewer calories, eating less fat, joining a weight loss program, and taking diet pills whereas more men report skipping meals or doing nothing. Thus, men’s approach to eating tends to be uncomplicated and pleasure oriented whereas women’s complex relationship to their weight is associated with more ambivalent attitudes toward food and greater weight control activities (Kiefer, Rathmanner and Kunze 2005).

To supplement informants’ account of their weight loss experiences, and to provide context for their interpretation, I tracked internet weight loss forums, reviewed numerous weight loss publications, examined advertisements for weight loss products, and read several published weight loss memoirs. These activities began prior to entering the field and continued through the data collection and interpretation phases.

4.3.1 Phenomenological Interviews

Phenomenological interviews (Thompson, Pollio and Locander 1994) with six women constitute the first set of data for this research. Participants were recruited through a network of personal contacts. To avoid imposing stress, coping, or magical thinking schemas, informants were told that the purpose of the study was to better understand their experiences of weight loss and weight maintenance efforts and the products and services they use to this end. An emergent design was adopted, where informants were recruited until variance in the emerging data – in terms of breadth and richness of experiences – as well as redundancy in my interpretive categories, were achieved. Table 4.1 describes interview participants’ profiles.
Table 4-1: Informants’ Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Family Status</th>
<th>Childhood</th>
<th>Adult Weight History</th>
<th>Current Weight Goal</th>
<th>Exercise</th>
<th>Diet Programs</th>
<th>Supplement Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celia</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Risk Management Consultant</td>
<td>Divorced, no child</td>
<td>Weight Watchers leader</td>
<td>Strained dieting episodes starting at age of 12. Celia has always remained within 20 pounds of her desired weight of 125 pounds.</td>
<td>Wished to lose about 10 pounds.</td>
<td>Curves center</td>
<td>No specific diet</td>
<td>Fat intake monitored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>Divorced, mother of two</td>
<td>Overweight most of her life</td>
<td>Tried numerous weight loss programs (TOPS, Weight Watchers, South Beach Diet, etc.). Lost 75 pounds through diet and exercise.</td>
<td>Wished to lose another 40 pounds.</td>
<td>No longer exercising</td>
<td>No specific diet</td>
<td>No gain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Dental Hygienist</td>
<td>Married, no child</td>
<td>Experimented with weight loss products in high school</td>
<td>Has been trying to control her weight for most of her adult life.</td>
<td>Wished to lose another 10 pounds.</td>
<td>No longer exercising</td>
<td>Doctor-supervised diet</td>
<td>No gain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Mail Delivery Person</td>
<td>Married, mother of two</td>
<td>Put on weight after birth of second child</td>
<td>Join a program called Herbal Magic and had lost over sixty pounds through diet, exercise, and supplements.</td>
<td>Wished to lose another 10 pounds.</td>
<td>Walking</td>
<td>Doctor supervised diet</td>
<td>No gain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>Retired Woman</td>
<td>Married, adopted son</td>
<td>Overweight but began to gain weight a few years ago</td>
<td>Lost 5 pounds through exercise (walking), selecting healthier foods and portion reduction.</td>
<td>Wished to lose another 10 pounds.</td>
<td>Walking</td>
<td>Doctor supervised diet</td>
<td>No gain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Child Care Provider</td>
<td>Married, mother of two</td>
<td>Had a weight surplus all her life</td>
<td>Weight became a health issue during second pregnancy.</td>
<td>Wished to lose another 10 pounds.</td>
<td>Walking</td>
<td>Doctor supervised diet</td>
<td>No gain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Depending on the informants’ preferences, the interviews took place in their home or in a meeting room on campus. Each interview lasted between 90 and 150 minutes. To gain a dynamic perspective on the phenomenon and to deepen my understanding of emerging themes, a second interview was conducted with three informants within an eight to ten-month period following the first interview.

Data collection followed the conventions of phenomenological interviewing (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989), allowing informants to tell their own story. The first interview opened with general questions about the participant’s personal background, interests, and life goals. The discussion then focused on the participant’s weight control experiences Questions and probes used were aimed at eliciting the informant’s description of (1) her thoughts and feelings regarding her current and desired weight and body image, (2) her experiences with the products and services she has used to control their weight, and (3) her weight loss and weight gain experiences – i.e., how she understand her successes and failures, the obstacles she faces, etc. The follow-up interview centered on the person’s weight control experiences since our first encounter; numerous descriptions of life changes also surfaced.

4.3.2 Weight Loss Blogs

The second data set is composed of four weight loss blogs. Blogs are hosted on many different Internet Service Providers (ISPs); consumers can purchase a domain name to host their blog or they can use web-based tools offered on certain sites (e.g., Blogger). No definitive statistic is available for the number of blogs in existence. To select blogs for this study, a list was generated from search engines (Google, Blogger) and from links from one blog to others. Selection of specific blogs was guided by five criteria. First, the selection focused on blogs with weight loss as the main topic, although broader descriptions of the person’s life were also desirable. Second, only blogs created by a single person – as opposed to groups – were
considered in order to allow analysis at the individual level. Third, given the consumer focus of the research, selected blogs were maintained by nonprofessional consumers, as opposed to specialists providing diet, exercise, or medical weight loss advice. Fourth, chronicles of ongoing weight loss efforts were chosen over descriptions of past weight loss experiences. This decision was made to take advantage of the unique advantage of blogs in providing a real-time account of consumers’ experiences. Finally, selection was limited to blogs established for at least one year by December 2005 and comprised of at least one post monthly. Final selection was made on the basis of the richness of information contained. For instance, blogs corresponding mostly to food or exercise logs were eliminated. The profile of the four blogs analyzed is presented in table 4.2.

Table 4-2: Bloggers’ profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blog</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Time period analyzed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hello I am Fat (<a href="http://plork.blogspot.com">http://plork.blogspot.com</a>)</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>October 2004 – December 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I'm Fat… for Now (<a href="http://www.fatfornow.com">http://www.fatfornow.com</a>)</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>May 2003 – December 2005</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3.3 Interpretation

Qualitative data were interpreted using a hermeneutic approach that entailed a series of part-to-whole iterations (Thompson 1997). First, an idiographic analysis of interviews was conducted, whereby the experiences of informants were considered individually (e.g., Fournier 1998; Mick and Buhl 1992). This involved a reconstruction of each informant’s weight control history, as well as an impressionistic reading of transcripts to identify themes emerging from informants’ experiences and the manifestations of stress, coping, and magical thinking in those
experiences. Next, cross-case analysis of the verbatim interview texts and blog entries was undertaken with the goal of identifying patterns across different informants’ stories. At this stage, relevant elements that I had encountered through my immersion in the consumption domain of weight loss (advertisements for weight loss products, ideas circulating on weight loss forums, and quotes from published weight loss memoirs) were also brought into the analysis. These texts inform our understanding of weight loss discourses in the marketplace and were useful in fleshing out emerging themes. The final stage of the analysis involved further developing my understanding of the emerging themes in participants’ experiences in relation to relevant literatures. This interpretative process was iterative, involving a continuous movement between individual stories and the emerging understanding of the entire set of textual data, with the goal of removing contradictions from the developing interpretation (Arnold and Fisher 1994; Thompson 1997).

The next chapter presents the findings emerging from my investigation of magical thinking in consumers’ attempts to cope with stressful situations encountered in their weight loss projects.
Chapter 5
Findings

This chapter articulates three themes that emerge from my investigation of consumers’ efforts to cope in the context of weight loss projects. The themes of magical agency, morality and technology represent my theoretical interpretation of consumers’ stories as developed in relation to a broader set of concerns and questions pertaining to the domains of magical thinking and consumer coping.

5.1 Magical Agency

5.1.1 Control and Lack of Control

The concept of control is omnipresent in women’s weight loss stories. The relationship between weight loss and control is complex, multi-faceted, and often paradoxical. A first dimension of this relationship pertains to women’s perception that their weight loss efforts represent a unique domain of agency in their life:

It’s the one thing you can actually control. You can’t control an abusive situation. You can’t really even control if you have low self-esteem. There are different things you can do to try to improve but you can’t control certain situations. You can’t control the actual issue. But food you can control. (Nicole)

I can’t control my myriad of mental problems, I can’t control my shitty finances, I can’t control the crappy way of the world, or control the emotional troubles of people I love, or control my goddamn cat who keeps waking me up at five in the morning with a claw in my face, but by god, I can slap on a pair of sneakers and I can fucking wheeze on a fucking treadmill […] Which is very satisfying. The control part, I mean. (Hello I am Fat, November 16, 2004)

These women express lack of agency over a number of issues in their lives and identify weight loss activities – in the form of regulated eating and exercising behaviors – as an important
area over which they can exert control. In particular, Nicole asserts that “you can’t control an abusive situation”; this is an interesting statement given that she also described in great details how earlier in her life she escaped an abusive marriage and successfully created a safe life for herself and her two children. Nicole was overweight during this relationship and it was only after she left her husband that she attempted to lose weight. Having in fact taken charge of an abusive situation, Nicole nevertheless describes this experience as uncontrollable whereas food intake is something she can regulate. The agentic appeal of weight control activities stems in part from the immediate “satisfying” feeling they provide – coping with an abusive situation or financial problems are complex, long-term endeavors but eating a healthy meal and performing a challenging workout provide an instant, tangible signal of self-control. Agency is also associated with the extensive knowledge these women have acquired through numerous weight loss and weight gain episodes; consider Nicole’s experience:

I know it all! I know people say that but seriously, you can ask me about any diet and I can tell you the good things, the bad things.

I’ve tried every diet in the book. Still to this day, I will try new things that come out. South Beach is a really big topic right now, you know, the high… no carbs, high protein… Everything! Everything! I’ve done Weight Watchers and Nutra-Systems and something called TOPS.

Whereas people may experience being out of control when they are unknowledgeable about a certain consumer domain (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1990), Nicole’s knowledge gives her the confidence to criticize the diet industry and to craft her own weight loss method based on different programs available:

I would like to lose forty pounds. That would be my goal, right as of today. In doing so, I’m not going to do it the easy way, which is drugs or fad diets. I call them fad diets now. What I’ve done is I’ve taken the good out of a whole bunch of different diets and kind of put it together.
Furthermore, the connection between self-control and weight loss is strongly embedded in cultural expectations (Thompson and Hirschman 1995). In fact, numerous studies report North Americans’ beliefs that body weight is controllable (Blaine and Williams 2004; Rodin et al. 1989). This theme is also pervasive in advertisements for weight loss products. In the 1990s, for example, weight loss organization Jenny Craig repositioned itself from a diet to a self-improvement program; a company’s marketing executive explains that weight loss “is really a life-changing enhancement, an opportunity to take control in a ‘90s, new millennium sort of way” (Pollack 1999, p.3).

**Figure 5-1: Controll Advertisement**

The advertisement shown in Figure 5.1 provides another unequivocal illustration of the connection between weight loss and self-control, from the name of the product itself (Controll) to
the contrast created between an obese, unhappy woman who is “out of control” versus a thin, smiling and confident-looking woman who “takes control”. Geier, Schwartz and Brownell (2003) observed that “before and after” diet ads increase overweight stigma by strengthening perceptions that weight is easily controllable.

Given the dominant social discourse on personal control over one’s weight, it is not surprising that women in the present study identify weight loss as a privileged domain of agency. Yet, these women’s ability to control their eating and exercising behaviors is not only associated with related weight loss goals; it becomes a powerful sign of their agency over other, seemingly unrelated events in their lives. For instance, Celia recounts how weight loss acquired a different meaning when her mother was diagnosed with a life-threatening disease:

Then life kind of changed at that point. And then the diet was more a way to control the situation. So then I dropped more weight. I became very regimented and... not intentionally so but just sort of by circumstances. I don’t know if it was an attempt to... Oh my God! A breast cancer could be related to obesity. It could be related to extra female hormones [...] It was a way to control the situation. It was a way to control my mother’s illness — internally. And it didn’t... not like it controlled it. But I felt, ok, I got one thing and it was all about that. So I ended up getting slimmer and slimmer and I went down to about 110.

Celia explains that her desire to be thin may have represented an attempt to ward off an obesity-related illness but she also understands it as a way to feel in control in the face of events over which she had no power. This construction of weight control as a way to symbolically cope with her mother’s cancer seems consistent with definitions of magical thinking as “achieving the appearance of control in the absence of real control” (Bolton et al. 2002, p.482). From a semiotic perspective (Peirce 1940), the symbolic value of weight control is in fact reified so that an indexical relationship develops whereby weight loss activities are seen to possess a factual connection with a person’s ability to transform not only her body but her life in general. Far from
representing an idiosyncratic phenomenon, this speaks to the social meaning of weight control behaviors:

Succeeding at dieting is treated by current Western society as not simply a means to personal goals such as greater attractiveness and longevity. It has come to stand for much more: self-control, ambition, and success in life. This symbolism is based on the idea that individuals control their behavior, which in turn controls weight […] People overestimate the degree of control they and others actually have over their body shape […] (Polivy and Herman 2000, p.129)

Paradoxically, despite their extensive experience with weight loss, and even though they describe weight loss as “the only thing you can control,” these women simultaneously express doubt – and even fear – over their ability to lose weight or to maintain a desired weight. After gaining twenty-five pounds, Nicole feels a sense of urgency to lose the weight before it creeps up to a point at which it would become nearly impossible to lose:

Nicole: I need to do something now while I can do something, you know, because… I believe you could always do something but I don’t want to get myself to a point where I feel I can’t do nothing. See, I still know I can do something and so I don’t want to get to where… it’s where I don’t feel like I can do anything.

Interviewer: What would be that point where you’d feel you can’t do anything?

Nicole: I don’t know what the point would be. I think it would, you know, if the weight continued and I went back up into the two hundreds and stuff like that, I think… that it would… I’m just going back to feelings I used to have, like, that feeling of hopelessness, that feeling of very unattractiveness […] So I don’t want to get myself up to where… cause I still feel good, you know, a lot of positive things happening so it’s not like… because I was at a point where there was nothing positive. I don’t mean that to go towards my children but at that point in my life hmm… my children… I feel awful even saying this but when I was in the abusive state and everything, my children were my life but they were also my burden, you know, and that sounds AWFUL. I love my children with all my heart. It just sounds awful [tearing up] but at that point in my life… I’m sorry… I don’t want to get to that point in my life again.
Participants’ concern over their ability to attain and maintain a thin figure is supported by studies suggesting that weight loss maintenance is equally if not more challenging than losing weight; several weight loss approaches generate short-term results but long-term maintenance remains problematic (Jeffery et al. 2000).

These stories reveal two interesting paradoxes: First, women claim agency over weight loss activity and simultaneously express doubt over their ability to attain and maintain a desired body weight. Second, weight loss provides them with a symbolic way to cope with other problems in their lives but the social expectation of self-control represents a heavy responsibility that becomes stressful itself:

I went in to get diagnosed as fat, but I was looking for a cause. My thyroid? Bad juju? Someone with a voodoo doll and a stick of butter? Something was going on, I thought. I kind of hoped. Though I had a feeling that maybe it was me – because isn’t that the way you always feel? Like no matter what, it’s your fault, and it’s going to always be your fault. In a way that is true. Your body is your responsibility. But I couldn’t tell where my responsibility was going awry. (Hello I am Fat, October 6, 2005)

To cope with these pressures and to sustain hope in the face of contradicting physical and cultural forces, participants adopt various coping strategies imbued with magical thinking. The next section articulates these strategies.

5.1.2 Reification of Control

For most women in this study, weight loss represents a life-long battle opposing the physical forces that regulate their bodies and the social obligation to control their weight (Thompson and Hirschman 1995). Their narratives, however, also reveal the presence of mysterious forces that influence their ability to lose weight:

Celia: I think that genetically, my sister and I very much take after my dad’s side of the family, which is not obese. I’ve never
weighed beyond 145, you know, and even so, there’s muscle in that and that’s probably the average female size.

Interviewer: So you feel that you’ve always been within a healthy range?

Celia: Yeah, I have. Yeah, but there’s always the fear that oh-oh, if I slide down that slope, my mother’s genes are going to take over and I’ll be plump and I’ll… you know…

Celia acknowledges that her weight has always been within an average, healthy range and yet she expresses concern over her ability to maintain that weight. This apprehension is hypostatized in the form of her mother’s genes, which threaten to “take over” if she gains weight. The idea that a detached, imaginary entity might exert control over the person’s weight and weight loss attempts is manifested in numerous ways:

It was a similar dissociation to the bingeing – that resigned feeling that I can’t stop, that someone else is in control and I just have to surrender. (Courtney Rubin, The Weight-Loss Diaries, p.103)

This hasn’t been such a great week, with the whole “on plan” thing. I didn’t have to do that. I know there are cravings associated with PMS and I am willing to assuage those cravings. I know there are mood things associated, and changes in my body that are less than pleasant, but why did I have to allow that to take over me completely? There was no reason to do that […] It’s like I’m trapped inside my body, banging my fists on a locked door and crying nooooooo!, all dramatic-like, and being ignored as terrible things go on without my consent or help. (Hello I am Fat, July 12, 2005)

In these two examples, self-control failures are presented in terms of surrendering to an irresistible power. Overeating or satisfying a craving is experienced as almost painful, something these women do despite themselves, succumbing to forces that oppose their willpower. These overwhelming forces are often embodied in a specific object; food, for instance, is commonly anthropomorphized as a seducer:
Aged English or New York cheddar, even tightly cosseted as it is in cheesecloth and tucked into the far back of the refrigerator’s butter drawer, sings love songs in my ear. The cheddar croons about Braeburn apples in the fruit basket and round brown hazelnuts in the top drawer. Down the street an old-time bakery makes plain, unfashionable and not all that tasty pies. The filling for these pies comes from commercial-sized cans and the crusts are premade. These pies, from three blocks away, call, “Judith, Judith.” An unopened bag of potato chips or an unopened box of vanilla wafers can sit in my pantry for months. I need exercise no self-control not to open these bags and boxes. However, once I open the containers, I can’t quit eating. I want every chip, all the wafers. I do not know why that is. (Judith Moore, Fat Girl, p.10)

I’d see something… and it was terrible because I’d see something in the cupboard and think “I don’t need that” and I’d walk away… but it was still here [points to her head] and I’d sit down and I’d think “I might as well get it now cause I know I’m going to go back and get it” (Jennifer)

Several participants recounted the enticing pull of a certain food, how it calls out to them. For many of them, a sealed box muffles this voice which becomes irresistibly loud once the seal is broken. The body is another important actor in women’s control narratives. This process begins with a distinction made between the self and the body. These women’s weight control efforts are representative of a dualistic cultural orientation that dichotomizes body and mind and creates an obligation for the mind to control the body (Thompson and Hirschman 1995). This system construes the individual as an intra-active self, that is, an individual characterized by self-control and a self to be controlled (Ogden 1997, 1995). In this battle, however, consumers do not perceive their body as a merely a passive object to be transformed; they often depict it as a willful, powerful entity with desires that opposes their own desires. This is apparent in claims that “my body loves carbs!” (Nicole) or that “my body seems to be conspiring against me” (Courtney Rubin, The Weight-Loss Diaries, p.156). Again, this discourse finds an echo in weight loss products advertising. The advertisement presented in Figure 5.2, for instance, asks consumers: “Is your metabolism holding you back?” The picture reinforces the notion of one’s metabolism
opposing one’s desire to lose weight. Indeed, the woman in this ad wears athletic clothing and she tries to get off the couch but she is held back by a pair of fat, unhealthy, grayish hands that represent her reified metabolism.

Figure 5-2: One-a-Day Weight Smart Advertisement

Although the body is often invested with powers that oppose one’s will, it is sometimes enlisted as a partner in a self-transformation project:

Nicole: We’ve done the Dexatrim. We’ve done the Slim Fast.

Interviewer: You say “we.” That’s you and…

Nicole: Me. Me! Me and me [pointing to her chest, then to her head]. We! There’s two or three of me [laughs] We did this!
Similarly, women also depict other benevolent powers that assist them in losing weight; for instance, Nicole speaks of waiting and preparing for a “click” that will ignite her weight loss efforts:

If you follow the Canada Food Guide and eat what is proper, you know, less fat, less meat – it’s important to have both but less of them – more of your vegetables, more of your wheat, your grains, you know, it will come off. It will come off with exercise. Everybody knows that. People who have weight problems aren’t stupid people. Actually, they’re probably more intelligent in those categories – it seems ironic – because you’re almost more intelligent than someone who doesn’t have a weight problem. And you’ve done all the investigating, all the different programs. It’s just that there’s just something inside of you that just has to click so that you do it. And it’s coming. Oh, I know it’s coming! So I’m getting myself ready because when it comes for me I’m very committed.

Nicole’s narrative is interesting in that it juxtaposes her absolute certainty in her knowledge of effective weight loss approaches with her waiting for “something to click” before she can enforce these eating and exercising guidelines. It might be tempting to dismiss these descriptions as external attribution of blame; however, a similar phenomenon occurs when these women are successfully losing weight and yet keep doubting their ability to do so. Even as they acknowledge that their success is attributable to their own efforts (dieting, exercising), they express a fear that some mysterious factor might intervene:

Jennifer: [My husband] just sits there and has his wings and his mozza sticks and his garlic bread and whatever he wants [laughs].

Interviewer: And you don’t want any?

Jennifer: No, no I honestly don’t, no. And I think maybe part of it is because I know I can’t eat just one. I don’t think I can… but I don’t want to know if I can.
I kept looking at different foods and thinking: Is it possible that I really don’t want to eat that? It was like discovering I had some sort of magical ability, and I had to keep testing to make sure it wasn’t fluke. I didn’t eat for the rest of the car ride. (Courtney Rubin, The Weight-Loss Diaries, p.94)

Both women find themselves able to resist food but whereas Jennifer prefers not to find out how strong that resistance really is, Courtney keeps testing out her newfound “magical ability.” Their own willpower is reified, externalized, and perceived as something that cannot entirely be trusted. Interestingly, however, the action of these mysterious forces is not perceived to operate entirely outside the person’s control and women described numerous instances in which they conjure auspicious forces that assist in their weight loss and hide from adverse forces that oppose their desires:

And like that, just like that, I am counting weight watchers points, and I am exercising. I’ve been afraid to say it to anyone, been afraid to write it down, been afraid to think about it. I’ve just been keeping my head down and plowing ahead as unconsciously as possible, for fear I’d jinx everything and ruin it all and I’d be back to my old slothful ham-eating ways. (Hello I am Fat, November 12, 2004).

This woman perceives her ability to adopt behaviors conducive to weight loss as inexplicable (“just like that”) and she describes trying to act in a way that does not jeopardize her continued success. In particular, her fear that “to think about it” might “jinx everything” constitutes an interesting illustration of magical thinking as it simultaneously invokes notions of a mystical order to worldly events and the possibility for the mind to symbolically influence this order through participation.

Through these narratives, informants describe several ways in which their weight loss efforts are influenced by mysterious forces. These forces reside in different vessels, from the indefinite feeling that “someone else is in control” or that “something inside of you that just has
to click” to specific reified entities that prevent or facilitate weight loss: their body that “conspires” against their desire to lose weight, their mother’s genes that threaten to “take over” and make them fat, their metabolism that “holds them back,” their willpower that gives them a “magical ability” to avoid tempting food, and finally food itself, which beckons them to succumb. Importantly, women do not feel completely vulnerable to the influence of these mysterious forces on their weight loss efforts. Although they cannot directly control these forces, informants perceive that they can influence the outcome through symbolic action. This may include getting ready for the “click” that will activate weight loss or keeping quiet about one’s weight loss so as not to “jinx” the process.

5.1.3 Conclusion: Self-Control and Magical Agency

The theme of control that emerges from participants’ stories is grounded in an effort to cope with a cultural responsibility to control one’s weight in the face of natural forces that constrain one’s agency in this domain. This project seems largely doomed and there is little hope for control; even if a person loses weight, odds that they will maintain a desired weight are meager. Against this bleak background, magical agency creates hope for control and sustains consumers’ weight loss projects.

Magical agency involves the construction of an alternative reality that expands the realm of the possible between mundane reality and fantasy. Within this reality, magical agency refers to consumers’ practice of negotiating with mysterious forces in the process of achieving desired ends; this includes summoning auspicious forces that support consumers’ desires as well as eluding adverse forces that oppose them. In particular, consumers come to view their bodies as not only buffeted by physical natural forces but also by magical forces. While they do not have direct control over the magical forces, they feel that they might be able to positively influence these forces by engaging in symbolic actions.
5.2 Morality

In her memoir, Frances Kuffel (2004) writes that “[o]besity is weakness made obvious” (p.23). This statement illustrates the widespread belief in western cultures that the appearance of one’s body is a material representation of the moral character of one’s inner self (Foucault 1978) and, more specifically, that fatness indicates some deficiency of character (Bordo 1993; Jutel 2005). This relationship between the inner and outer self permeates the discourse of participants in this study; consider, for instance, how Nicole describes her self-perceptions prior to losing forty pounds: “My outer and inner were the same back then, and my inner was not good, you know, so my outer was not good.”

The moral value attached to body weight further extends to the foods and practices that promote thinness or fatness (Jutel 2005; Nemeroff and Cavanaugh 1999). Indeed, informants frequently referred to “bad” and “good” foods based on their fattening properties and Susan confides: “Carbs are my downfall.” The negative moral value of certain foods usually stands in opposition to the pleasure they procure:

When my daughter was in high school, she was supervisor at Dairy Queen. I went to Dairy Queen every night. Ice cream and me got so attached! [laughs] So every night I needed that sugar fix, which was not good. But it was good [laughs]. (Nicole)

Further, consuming “bad foods” generally triggers feelings of guilt, as illustrated in Jennifer’s reaction to “cheating” when she eats out at a restaurant:

I have a Caesar salad, which I shouldn’t have because the dressing on a Caesar salad is not on the diet […]. I feel guilty when I cheat because the Caesar dressing is bad. Before we started going back to the restaurant, if I cheated, I might have a cup and a half of grapes instead of a cup. And that would be a cheat for me. And I’d feel guilty.
The moral value of food and body appearance is largely rooted in religious discourses, including Christian asceticism and the Puritan ethic (Bordo 1993; Nemeroff and Cavanaugh 1999; Thompson and Hirschman 1995). These meanings have mostly become secularized in western societies (Lupton 1996) and they are omnipresent in advertising for weight loss products. For example, the advertisement presented in Figure 5.3 plays on the taboo character of sexual promiscuity with its admonition to “respect yourself in the morning” The consumer is further invited to do this by consuming a “luscious” (yet low fat) breakfast bar. After all, you would not want your decadent food choices to show up on your waist for everyone to see, would you? These narratives are consistent with Thompson and Hirschman’s (1995) observation that the cultural imperative of self-control produces the moral obligation to control one’s body weight through certain consumption practices such as dieting and exercising.

Figure 5-3: Nutri-Grain Bars Advertisement
This perspective thus introduces a moral dimension to self-control. As the previous theme demonstrated a close connection between magical agency and self-control, it may not be surprising to find that magical agency also entails a moral dimension. Indeed, the magical forces that regulate consumers’ bodies and their attempts to lose weight are laden with morality:

You see your face in the mirror and yourself in you head and you are convinced that you are so very cute, and you are always astonished to see that it is not the case, it is not the truth, when the pictures from the wedding or the party come back, when you catch a glimpse of yourself in a mirror, your reflection in a store window. And you hate it, and you hate yourself, and this dissonance – the way your outside lies about who you are. Because it’s lying. You are not that fat person, because in that moment of shock, you know how everyone knows fat people are unpleasant people, sweaty people who dress ridiculously and have no self control, who are affront to aesthetics. And you hate it. (Hello I am Fat, October 25, 2004)

The theme of magical agency described how consumers reify control by distinguishing between their body and their self, and by imbuing the body with intentionality and the power to oppose their desires. This woman’s description of the “dissonance” she perceives between her physical appearance and her self reveals a moral aspect to this reification process. In particular, she recognizes the immoral symbolism of fat in that “everyone knows fat people […] have no self control” and she simultaneously describes her own overweight body as a traitor who “lies about who you are.” For this woman, her body becomes a fiend, the evil doer who threatens the virtue and worthiness of the inner self. This morally laden discourse forms the foundation of complex feelings of guilt and self-hatred that encompass the lying, overweight body as well as the self that fails to control this body.

The presence of mysterious, morally-laden forces in consumers’ narratives resonates with Muniz and Schau’s (2005) observation that consumers frequently adopt supernatural, magical,
and religious motives to make sense of their world and to manage stressful situations. These motives in turn impart meaning to consumption objects and activities that become vectors of transformative experiences (Muniz and Schau 2005). Participants in the present study evoke such motives in the form of mysterious forces that oppose or grant their wishes, forces replete with morality and vestiges of religious discourses. Furthermore, these motives are closely associated with the moralization of weight loss.

In addition to adopting moral motives to understand their situation (e.g., constructing one’s overweight body as a liar that betrays one’s true inner self), participants also call upon similar forces in an instrumental manner in their attempt to lose weight. These strategies are described next.

### 5.2.1 Weight Loss as a Pilgrimage

Consumers perceive that their weight loss efforts are affected by magical forces fraught with morality. In turn, these meanings shape their attempt to lose weight into a moral journey:

> Losing weight becomes a pilgrimage. Every focus in on the pilgrimage and what the pilgrimage will bring. The hunger pains and the dreaded doom of exercise are not only tolerable but also expected. I leave behind my old life and its problems to seek out this magic place called 130 pounds, where self-esteem is ever so abundant. (Lori Ford, *Tales from the Scale*, p.96)

This account is replete with spiritual metaphors that capture the moral dimension of weight loss as an identity project. First, weight loss is described as a pilgrimage to a magical destination where the self is transformed (“I leave behind my old life”). On internet forums and blogs dedicated to weight loss, this destination is sometimes called “onederland;” getting to “onederland” means reaching a weight under 200 pounds but this term also alludes to the extraordinary promises this destination beholds. For Lori, this is a place “where self-esteem is
ever so abundant.” Similarly, Susan depicts her weight loss efforts as a journey towards an idyllic destination that resembles an image from a fashion magazine:

Susan: I’m not happy with where I am, but I’m going be happy when I get to where I want to be.

Researcher: Can you describe where you want to be?

Susan: Well, I was there a year ago. And I remember getting dressed for our Christmas party and I had a fabulous outfit, new shoes. I had my hair done up – I had long hair then – I had an updo. I did my makeup. It was beautiful. I felt like a million bucks […] I looked like I walked off the pages of In Style magazine. I looked absolutely stunningly gorgeous and I felt that way.

Again, losing weight involves more than achieving a certain appearance; it means transforming oneself and one’s ability to cope with life problems: “I really would like to will away the… the extra cushion because it still might help me deal with other things better. I don’t know why! I still want to lose weight” (Susan).

Second, to reach this magical destination called thinness one must endure an arduous journey comprised of many sacrifices. In their attempts to lose weight, informants adopt various strategies and their experiences suggests a tension between structured, restrictive plans and more flexible, permissive approaches, a tension reminiscent of the moral struggle between good and evil. Susan’s story vividly illustrates this theme; her experience shows a cyclical pattern of adopting a regimented diet, experiencing rapid and considerable weight loss, then seeking greater flexibility and progressively abandoning the diet and gaining back weight. At the time of our first interview, Susan was following a strict, doctor-supervised diet. Talking about her preference for this type of program, she says:

I’ve never done well on a Weight Watchers type program where you can have some of everything because then you want more of
everything. It seems to me. [...] But I feel better when I’m on a stricter program and just… don’t even look at other things.

Susan’s account reveals her perceptions that lax weight loss plans are dangerous; by allowing a taste of the forbidden, they make her more vulnerable to temptation (“then you want more of everything”). In contrast, a stricter program keeps her safely shielded from temptation (“don’t even look at other things”). Of course, a strict program entails deprivation from the foods one enjoys but this sacrifice is accepted for the promise of future reward, a belief that resembles the Christian asceticism belief that “delaying gratification in the present will be rewarded in the future” (Thompson and Hirschman 1995, p.146):

Susan: I’m very comfortable with it… most of the time I’m on it. It’s just the odd occasion when you think: Oh geez, I’d love a cranberry scone with my tea! [laughs] And, oh no! Can’t do that.

Interviewer: What happens on those occasions?

Susan: Hmm… another time. I’ll think: One day… one day I’ll get there. One day I’ll be able to sit down and enjoy a scone with my tea.

Although Susan claims to be comfortable with adhering to a restrictive program and postponing consumption of pleasurable foods until she has reached her weight loss goal, she simultaneously expresses a paradoxical desire for a flexible approach to weight loss. For instance, Susan relates how she previously decided to adopt a less stringent maintenance program: “It was my decision, to give me some flexibility over the holiday season.” At the time, Susan had lost 60 pounds and she was only 7 pounds away from her goal weight. Susan was unable to achieve her weight loss goal after the holidays and she eventually quit the program altogether, gaining back 30 pounds. Reflecting on her decision, she reckons that allowing herself more flexibility probably prevented her from reaching her desired weight loss:

I think I probably could have achieved my goal before Christmas without a big stretch and then go on permanent maintenance then
instead of all this finagling around that I did, you know, just:
“Oh, I want to give myself some flexibility for Christmas.” I think I probably wasted some time and energy then that, you know, I could have just gotten there and have gone on maintenance and not have to worry about that.

Susan eventually went back on the program several months later and at the time of our first interview she was losing weight again. Surprisingly, Susan was still considering a less rigid plan for the upcoming holiday season:

I’m thinking about what to do. I’m trying to work on my strategy for that. I don’t know. I don’t know. I think hmm… I don’t have too much going on between now and my husband’s Christmas party, which is December 18th, so I may allow myself a little flexibility then. And then I’ll see how I feel when I get there. Maybe a couple of things that I’m… that I would not ordinarily… permit myself to have, you know, I might do that, yeah.

This struggle between flexibility and structure, between pleasure and deprivation, recalls the tension between seduction and morality in consumer desire (Belk, Ger and Askegaard, 2005). By allowing “a little flexibility” in her diet, Susan grants herself the permission to transgress her virtuous eating habits. She succumbs to these transgressions despite recognizing that they are dangerous, having prevented her from achieving her weight loss goals in the past. As Belk et al. (2005) observe, “transgression is not just dangerous and negative but is also seen by some as necessary to feel alive” (p.345).

The appeal of structure in these narratives is undeniable. A stringent plan is unambiguously “good”; deprivation is a promise of future rewards, of salvation from fatness, and it offers a safe haven that protects the dieter from temptation:

But I am scared to move away from the safe world of peanut butter and jelly. On any of the weight watchers plan, on any of the diet plans, you can eat anything. At any time! Kind of. The world is your oyster! Within reason. But even though there are strictures and guidelines, it’s too much. Too much freedom! Dizzy, dizzy, delirious freedom. If I were a rich person who was
also nauseatingly spoiled, by god I would have a personal chef, and the chef would tell me what to eat and I would be happy. I would not stress and panic and worry and things would be easy and birds would sing and the hallelujah chorus would break into beatboxing joy. Not being rich or spoiled, I frantically search for guidelines, boundaries, a tiny little box in which to lock myself. (Hello I am Fat, February 11, 2005)

In contrast to the “safe world” of structure, flexibility seems dangerous with its promise of “dizzy, dizzy, delirious freedom.” Although a strict plan offers refuge against temptation (“a tiny little box in which to lock myself”), flexibility beckons the dieter with its seductive promise of pleasure and its call becomes more irresistible as the results of the diet begin to appear:

It’s been a week and a half on the Sad and Lonely meal plan, and I am happy to cautiously, delicately, quietly say in a voice just above a whisper that I think it is working, and then duck beneath a table waiting for the Fat Bomb to drop. I stopped following the meal plan to the letter the day they wanted me to put more goddamn cottage cheese on something else – I think it was a plate of cottage cheese. (Hello I am Fat, March 17, 2005)

Notice how the appealing boundaries that promised safety have become a “Sad and Lonely meal plan” due to the restrictions they impose on the dieter. Even though this plan seems effective, this woman begins to deviate from its unpalatable prescriptions.

Informants’ construction of weight loss as a pilgrimage and the metaphor of good and evil manifest in their descriptions of weight loss strategies are consistent with Muniz and Schau’s (2005) observations that consumers adopt magico-religious motifs when confronted with danger and stigma. They also echo Belk, Ger and Askegaard’s (2003) description of the tension between seduction and morality in consumer desire. In the narratives presented here, however, moral motifs and actions are not only adopted for the comfort they provide or because consumers desire to behave morally. Through magical thinking, morality takes on an instrumental role as it becomes a way to symbolically prevail upon the magical forces that influence a desired outcome.
This process is also apparent in consumers’ expectations of retribution and their hope for salvation, two coping strategies that are described next.

5.2.2 Retribution

Dieting involves foregoing or limiting one’s intake of several pleasurable foods, something dieters experience as a form of deprivation:

It’s not fun being on Weight Watchers. I mean, not that it’s not fun but I guess I like to eat so… It was ok but it was just the whole counting of everything, you know. I mean, I like to have a glass, a couple of glasses of wine on weekends and that would be 10 points of my 25 I’m allocated for the day. So if I have half a bottle of wine I blow 10 points! [laughs] So it’s like, no! It’s that concept of you can either be like THAT or have a LIFE. (Celia)

Can I tell you that it’s not easy? That you can cut go to the cafeteria and walk past the taco stand and the sandwich stand and the pot of chili and the plates of cake and make yourself a salad on which you do not even put fucking cheese, for god’s sake, because this is just how goddamn good you are (and can I tell you how much I hate how moral values are assigned to fat and thin, to food, to our foodchoices? Remind me to tell you some time) and you gnaw on your leaves and your beans and your goddamn dry chicken breast and you are overcome—overfucking come by how goddamn unfair it is. (Hello I am Fat, October 25, 2004).

These women’s accounts reveal a clear struggle between enjoying the foods they like and obtaining the body they desire. Dieting is perceived as “unfair” and means not “having a life”. This is a difficult choice and women often perceive that forsaking pleasure entitles them to a reward:

I want a vacation from dealing with food. I’m either starving (or feel like I am) or binging, and either way the thoughts of food are constant. Not only do I want my jeans to be looser for obvious reasons (I want to be thinner) but I want my jeans looser because I feel like I deserve it. I want a reward just for having to deal. (Courtney Rubin, The Weight-Loss Diaries, p.132)
These narratives are saturated with magical thinking in the form of expectations of retribution (Stivers 1999). For instance, Courtney feels that she deserves to lose weight because of the strain of having to constantly think about monitoring her food intake, because coping with this stress in itself warrants weight loss (“I want a reward just for having to deal”). These women understand that weight loss results from restricted caloric intake but they also develop expectations of weight loss based on the symbolic value of such restriction: Dieting is experienced as stressful because it requires sacrifices and constant vigilance and dieters feel a moral entitlement to being rewarded for having to cope. Expectations of retribution are further associated with a belief in a just world (Lerner 1980), the belief in an orderly and fair world where good actions are rewarded and bad deeds are punished. Consequently, self-denial should lead to commensurate rewards. This is how a dieter comes to perceive that it is “unfair” to be fat despite being “good” by abstaining from pleasurable food.

Interestingly, expectations of retribution for coping with the deprivation of dieting sometimes involve the very food banned on a diet; Jennifer recounts how this pattern characterized her previous attempts to lose weight:

Jennifer: The baseball team I play on twice a week, we always go to the bar afterwards and they get a munchie platter and I usually have my Diet Coke. It doesn’t bother me at all.

Interviewer: It doesn’t?

Jennifer: No. I can honestly say it doesn’t. And it must be because I’ve taught myself how to eat.

Interviewer: And it’s something you did not do before?

Jennifer: No. No. I would have… If it was the cabbage soup diet, I’d have a cabbage soup and think: Oh, so far all I’ve had was cabbage soup so I can have potato chips now!
Jennifer’s story illustrates a common paradox in dieters’ behavior: Although she understood that weight loss requires food restriction, she also felt she deserved to indulge in her favorite food as a reward for adhering to her diet. Thus, Jennifer’s claim that she “taught [herself] how to eat” refers to more than developing an understanding of nutritional principles; it also entails breaking the symbolic expectation that deprivation justifies rewarding herself with food.

Another manifestation of retribution consists of the tendency to gorge on forbidden foods just before embarking on a diet, a ritual frequently known as the “last supper”:

This is what we ate the Saturday before last:
- Couple of stray squares of leftover chocolate for breakfast
- A cheese & bacon roll and 500ml chocolate milk while we went to the movies
- Doner kebab, fries and soft drink for lunch
- Chocolate croissant
- McDonalds burger, fries and shake for dinner
- Trifle for dessert – consisting of cake, jelly, fruit, custard and whipped cream

So okay, this was not a TYPICAL day. That is what we called our LAST HURRAY DAY, meaning we scoffed into everything we knew we’d have to give up once we joined WW on Monday. But all the same, how bloody disgusting! How devoid of all nutritional value! But we relished it all like it was our last supper.  

This last supper is a moment of wanton indulgence before the rigor of a strict diet; it represents a form of self-gratification warranted by anticipated self-control, a sin that will be absolved by impending penitence.

Thus, consumers’ coping strategies display magical thinking in the form of retribution. Indeed, dieters’ expectations evince a belief in a just world where good actions are rewarded. This is an “extraordinary” connection in that these expectations are based on symbolic, moral actions (e.g., feeling entitled to lose weight for “just having to deal” with the deprivation of dieting) rather than scientific, causal principles (e.g., expecting to lose weight because dieting generates a caloric deficit). Through retribution, these women believe that they deserve to indulge
in their favorite foods to compensate for denying themselves the pleasure of these foods for a certain time ("Oh, so far all I’ve had was cabbage soup so I can have potato chips now!") or in anticipation of such deprivation (e.g., the “last hurray day”).

## 5.2.3 Salvation

Anyone who has tried to lose weight agrees that it is a difficult enterprise: “Putting on weight is very easy. Losing it is the hard thing” (Nicole). This stressful situation is exacerbated by the lack of practical and generalizable solution to weight management and the confusion created by competing dietary claims (Katz 2005). In this context, consumers sometimes seek salvation in market offerings; recall, for instance, how one woman depicted her wish of having a personal chef:

> If I were a rich person who was also nauseatingly spoiled, by god I would have a personal chef, and the chef would tell me what to eat and I would be happy. I would not stress and panic and worry and things would be easy and birds would sing and the hallelujah chorus would break into beatboxing joy. (Hello I am Fat, February 11, 2005)

This account suggests that agency, in the form of choice, is stressful and that having a personal chef would eliminate the stressor because the chef would reduce confusion regarding food choice ("the chef would tell me what to eat"). Noteworthy in this consumer’s description are the miraculous expectations of what this coping strategy would yield: “birds would sing and the hallelujah chorus would break into beatboxing joy”.

Celia described a similar experience in which she felt her career and her life in general were out of control. Whereas in the past she often used weight management activities as a symbolic way to control other events in her life, this time she felt unable to do so. Consequently, she saw her weight creeping up and became increasingly distressed, until she decided to leave everything to undertake a pilgrimage on the Camino trail for an entire summer:
When I left Vancouver, I was in a very bad spot in terms of where my life, where my career was going. And I really didn’t like this. I was hoping for the salvation of the Camino to maybe get rid of the pounds, like, shed my skin, sort of image.

At that point in her life, Celia felt unable to take control of her weight and her life: “I felt so bad internally, with what was going on in my life and my job, but I couldn’t really pinpoint it, that nothing could make me feel better about anything.” In this hopeless context, she turns to a pilgrimage as a last resort, looking “for the salvation of the Camino” as a solution to her problems.

In these narratives, the marketplace offers salvation when consumers feel that they lack the resources to cope with the stressful situations they face. Salvation comes in the form of magical solutions that swiftly deliver the consumer from the burden of their sin:

I am a sucker for Before and After. In print ads, melancholy ultra-obese women transform themselves into trim, cheerful blondes. Television commercials, though, are best because the fatty tells how he lost his hundred pounds through diet and exercise and whatever product the commercial’s selling. The now-slender fatty rhapsodizes about changes in his life. He looks out of the television screen into viewers’ eyes. “You can do it,” he says. “I did.” (Judith Moore, *Fat Girl*, p.18)

The promise of an extraordinary transformation (“melancholy ultra-obese women transform themselves into trim, cheerful blondes”) sustains hope when consumers’ usual coping resources are insufficient. Consider Nicole’s decision to use health-threatening weight loss aids:

I did the Redux. I did the Fen-Phen. […] You do have to read the warnings and with Redux it did cause rapid heart rate, you know, and you could easily go into convulsions and you could have a heart attack. I took the pills. Definitely. Anything would be better than being big. Yeah. The way people looked at me, the way I felt like I was treated, not given respect, you know, by neighborhood children. Like, my son would be getting into fights with boys at a young age because the boy would say: “You have a fat mom.” And my son would fight them because they said things like that. Anything would be better than being fat. Part of
me still thinks that. I know it sounds awful, but part of me still thinks that.

In a cultural context that construes overweight as a sin, as the embodiment of one’s moral failure to exert control over one’s body, overweight consumers attempt to redeem themselves through weight loss projects. When their own coping resources are insufficient and their enterprise seems doomed, they sometimes look for salvation in market offerings that bring hope by substituting for their own agency. When nothing else works, these market offerings promise an answer to consumers’ confusion (“the chef would tell me what to eat”) and an extraordinary transformation of their body and their life.

5.2.4 Conclusion: Morality and Coping

Fat carries a strong moral symbolism in our society; because we believe that we have control over our weight, a fat body becomes a symbol of immorality as it testifies to our inability to exert self-control. This moral connotation extends to the mysterious forces consumers perceive to affect their weight loss efforts. Indeed, consumers’ coping strategies reveal expectations of retribution for moral action and hope for salvation. In this context, weight loss activities acquire a symbolic dimension. For instance, dieting and exercising are no longer activities one engages in based strictly on physical laws of calorie expenditure; they become instrumental moral actions, acts of self-deprivation that warrant reward.

The moral value of fatness and thinness transform consumers’ weight loss efforts into a moral journey to an enchanted place where their body, their self, and their life are transformed. On this journey, consumers must resolve the tension between good and bad, between deprivation and gratification, to entreat the magical forces that can help them reach their destination. When their coping resources fail and they feel helpless in taking control of their weight, consumers seek hope of salvation in products and experiences that promise miraculous redemption from fat.
5.3 Technology

5.3.1 Numbers Don’t Lie

Numbers and statistics play a central role in our contemporary milieu where technology has become sacred: “No one can doubt the power of numbers: the majority, the statistical average, the normal distribution. Nathan Keyfitz claims that ‘Numbers provide the rhetoric of our age.’” (Stivers 1999, p.107) In particular, Stivers (1999) note that statistics have spawned the reified “average man,” defined in terms of statistical average and normal distribution. This kind of statistical rhetoric is omnipresent in the weight loss discourse; common labels include ‘normal weight’, ‘desirable weight’, ‘ideal weight’, and ‘healthy weight’. The notion of statistically-determined ‘desirable’ weight became popular in the early 20th century when insurance companies established height-weight tables based on their mortality experience (Bray 1995). For instance, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company introduced their standard height-weight tables for men and women that determined ‘desirable’ weights indicating those persons with the lowest mortality rates. The label ‘ideal weight’ gradually became associated with these tables in common usage, even though the term ‘ideal’ was not originally attached to the tables (Pai and Paloucek 2000). In the last thirty years, the concept of Body Mass Index (BMI) – equivalent to weight/height² – gained popularity in determinations of ideal weight and overweight; ‘healthy’ weight is generally defined as a BMI between 20 and 25 kg/m² (Bray 1998).

Employing these numeric tools, informants track their weight loss and weight gain with exacting precision; Jennifer, for instance, remarks: “I’ve lost sixty-six pounds so far; sixty-six and a quarter as of yesterday, actually.” Dieters use numbers as an objective measure of their progress, as “milestones” in reaching some ideal weight:

It’s taken me a while to get to this last milestone. When I say ‘milestone’, like, sixty pounds seem like it took me forever to get there, same with the twenty and forty and, you know, the five-
pound increments, it seems to take forever to get there. I’d get to forty-nine pounds and then I’d gain a pound. Argh! And then I’d get to forty-nine and a half pounds… and then I’d gain a half pound. It just seemed to take forever. (Jennifer)

Weight loss was previously described as a pilgrimage to a magical destination where the self is transformed; we already mentioned one such destination called “onederland,” which refers to achieving a body weight of less than 200 pounds. Numbers play a central role in consumers’ weight loss pilgrimages, both as a definition of the desired destination and as meaningful markers or milestones along the way:

Then there’s the matter of the goal weight I set for myself – 69 kilos (152lb). I haven’t weighed that little since I was 13 years old. I just chose 69kg coz it’s under 70kg therefore in my warped little mind it sounded skinnier. What the hell does the number matter anyway? (The Amazing Adventures of Dietgirl! July 30, 2001)

Do you know I only have 1.9 kilos (4.2lb) til I reach the amazing magical 40 kilos gone? (The Amazing Adventures of Dietgirl! August 21, 2001)

This woman established a weight goal based on the symbolic appeal of a given number (69 kg “sounded skinnier” than 70kg) although she realizes it might be unrealistic (“I haven’t weighed that little since I was 13 years old”). Although she questions the importance of numbers (“What the hell does the number matter anyway?”), she nevertheless imbues them with special meaning (“the amazing magical 40 kilos gone”).

Through magical thinking, power is externalized and consumers attempt to symbolically influence some mysterious entity that is in control; in this context, numbers are understood as objective signs from the reified entity. Consumers trust these signs even more than they trust themselves; numbers are meaningful and they make weight gain and weight loss “real” for consumers:
I knew it before I got on the scale – I felt it in my clothes, and in my body, and I had been avoiding stepping up for exactly that reason – I was not interested in the concrete evidence. [...] And so the number I saw, when I jumped up there, naked, first thing in the morning, was not entirely a surprise, but it still wasn’t, as you can imagine, pleasant. It was actually deeply, deeply unpleasant. [...] But it’s finally real. All this diet planning, exercise thinking about, grocery shopping stuff was playacting, because I really didn’t know what kind of shape I was in, and I really hadn’t realized how bad it had gotten. It wasn’t real, that sense that I have to buckle down. I’m buckling down, now. (Hello I am Fat, May 9, 2005)

If I had a bathroom scale at home, I’d be on and off it every fifteen minutes. Shari is always telling me weight is just a number, and ‘you is what you is.’ Much as I want to believe her, I can’t. How can I explain that I just know I looked thinner at 199 than I did at 200, and thinner at 189 than at 190? (Courtney Rubin, The Weight-Loss Diaries, p.56)

These narratives reveal the strong symbolic value of numbers in weight control. Although the first woman knew she had gained weight (“I knew it before I got on the scale – I felt it in my clothes, and in my body”), seeing the number ultimately changes her perception (“it’s finally real”). Similarly, the small one-pound difference between 199 and 200 pounds has a considerably large effect on another woman’s body perceptions (“I just know I looked thinner at 199 than I did at 200”). Thus, it is not the objective weight difference (e.g. one pound) that is meaningful, but the symbolic value attributed to these numbers. Consider, for instance, how two women describe the emotional impact of clothing sizes:

[I] was reading a story the other day in an Aussie magazine about clothing, and I did not realize the difference in clothing sizes. An Aussie size 12 is a SIZE 8 in the USA! [...] All I can say is, don’t ever come to Australia and buy clothes, coz the tags will be two sizes up, and how crushing would that be to your self esteem? (The Amazing Adventures of Dietgirl! August 15, 2001)

Some stores you go to, a ‘large’ would not even come close to fitting me. And so what kind of idea does that give you in your head? Like, my daughter, at the Garage store, she would have to
Even when consumers are aware of the subjective nature of garment sizes, the number still carries moral value and wearing a size ‘large’ sends a powerful message regardless of the actual measurements (“what kind of idea does that give you in your head?”) This moralization of numbers and sizes is also evidenced in the popular trend of vanity sizing:

“Vanity sizing” or offering garments with smaller size numbers but larger measurements allows firms to influence the psychological need of consumer’s [sic] to fit into a smaller size. Consumers believe they are wearing, what they consider, a more socially acceptable size. (Alexander, Connell and Presley 2005, p.56)

According to standard size measurements, that average 155-pound woman should be wearing a size 16, but thanks to vanity sizing, she’s probably buying a 10 or 12,” says Jim Lovejoy of the SizeUSA survey. “Most companies aren’t using the standard ASTM [American Society for Testing Materials] anymore. Sizes have been creeping up a half inch at a time so women can fit into smaller sizes and feel good about it. (Schrobsdorff 2006, p.55)

While providing reassurance to an increasingly heavier population that they can still fit into a desirable clothing size, vanity sizing is also associated with the recent phenomenon of clothing produced in sizes below zero. For example, clothing retailer Banana Republic has added size 00 to its sizing chart and Nicole Miller has introduced a “subzero” size; some express concern that these new sizes are becoming a “status symbol” among young women who may use this as a badge of moral superiority (Schrobsdorff 2006).

Hence, dieters interpret numbers, such as body weight and clothing size, as meaningful, morally-charged signs. The importance of these signs is further evidenced in the efforts women put forth for the signs to materialize, even if somewhat artificially; consider the strategies two women employed when attending Weight Watchers meeting:
About an hour before I had to leave to make it to the meeting, I looked down at my lap and realized I was wearing jeans. Jeans! […] Jeans are heavy. Heavy fabric. Heavy fabric adds imaginary pounds! Imaginary pounds show up on the scale exactly just like regular non-imaginary ones, and once joined, the regular pounds and the imaginary pounds, they would make a number that I really didn’t fucking want to see after a week of turning down cookies. […] So I considered my options. I could not go at all. But that would be wrong. […] Or I could change into the dress I had in the bag at my feet. The very clingy, very low-cut somewhat short black one I had worn one night when I went out with Guy […] An excellent plan would be to carry the dress with me to the weigh-in! And then I could change in the building there, pop onto the scale, change back out, and no one would even notice my brief appearance as a Las Vegas lounge act! I was a genius! […] The plan worked and I posted a charming 1.4 pound loss, bringing me to a total of 5 point, uh, something. It is funny how those points of pounds are so important to me, and yet, I keep forgetting what they are exactly. (Hello I am Fat, July 1, 2005)

I kind of had some of my mom’s bad habits, you know, really exercising before I went to my meetings or starting my weigh-in at night and then when I went the next time, I’d go in the morning so that I’d be lighter on the scale. There’s all different ways to cheat the program, right? [laughs] (Nicole)

These women are well aware that the number on the scale can be easily affected by additional factors beside body weight (“Heavy fabric adds imaginary pounds! Imaginary pounds show up on the scale exactly just like regular non-imaginary ones”). Yet, instead of adjusting their interpretation of the number accordingly, they devise complex strategies to see a desirable number that would provide the expected reward for their effort (“once joined, the regular pounds and the imaginary pounds, they would make a number that I really didn’t fucking want to see after a week of turning down cookies”) while acknowledging the self-deceptive nature of these strategies, (“There’s all different ways to cheat the program, right?”).
A final way in which women invest numbers with symbolic meaning is through the common practice of keeping different sizes clothing that lurk as ghosts of their former self or the first materialization of the self they are becoming:

My clothes that I was fitting into really nice again, they’re not fitting so nice anymore. So I’m looking at my clothes – and I’ve kept all my clothes so I have right from size 22 down to size 10 – and so I’m watching them all and now I’m back around 12, 13, sometimes even 14. And there’s all my nice dresses that I just bought, some suits, and I just wouldn’t wear them. They’re too tight, uncomfortable, don’t look right. So I’m looking at them and I turn my head and I see the other big sizes, right? I’m thinking, ok, no no no, can’t do this. I can’t do this. I don’t want to go back up through my closet again. I don’t want to do that. (Nicole)

So yesterday I decided to look back through the wardrobe archives, the ghosts of Sizes Past, and found my old suit, size 20, last worn in mid-1998. The jacket didn’t fit by a long shot, but THE PANTS, baby! I got into the pants! (The Amazing Adventures of Dietgirl! August 15, 2001)

Hence, consumers draw on science and technology in the process of externalizing control. Technology is about objectivity and numbers symbolize this externalized control; consumers use numbers as an “objective” signal from the externalized force that guides them through their moral weight loss journey. Given the importance of technology in consumers’ weight loss efforts, to what extent can marketers use technology to propose solutions that appeal to consumers? This question is explored next.

5.3.2 Magical Solutions

The consumer behavior literature presents conflicting views on the impact of technology on the level of stress in consumers’ lives. On one hand, some studies suggest that technology introduces paradoxes that can be a source of stress for consumers which, in turn, precipitate coping mechanisms. Indeed, Mick and Fournier (1998) observe that technological products entail
paradoxes that juxtapose positively- and negatively-valued outcomes (freedom and enslavement, competence and incompetence, efficiency and inefficiency, etc.). Other stressful paradoxes of technology include presenting consumers with novel product features that are perceived attractive yet overwhelming complex (Mukherjee and Hoyer 2001; Thompson, Hamilton and Rust 2005), bringing forth beneficial product improvements that simultaneously accelerate the rate of change and obsolescence in the marketplace (Strebel, O’Donnell and Myers 2004), and promising health benefits while creating an element of uncertainty and risk around health outcomes as in the case of genetically modified food (Klerck and Sweeney 2007; Tulloch and Lupton 2002).

On the other hand, some researchers propose that technology reduces stress by enabling otherwise incompatible consumer desires. For instance, Thompson (2004) notes that advertisements for natural health products depict products that are simultaneously natural and scientific: “Through the Gnostic metaphor of technology as liberator, these ads promise that the protective power of nature has been scientifically distilled into an essential form that can compensate for other lifestyle shortcomings” (p.169). In other words, technology allows consumers to reap the benefits of a natural lifestyle without having to adhere to its stringent demands. Thompson (2004) asserts that these natural health products are presented as “magic-in-a-bottle” and “magical elixirs,” a conclusion that resonates with the concept of magical solutions, defined as low-effort, quick, technological miracles that promise “something for nothing.” (Marshall and Larimer 1995). Stivers (1999) further articulates the connection between magic and technology in the marketplace by asserting that the centrality and sacralization of technology in contemporary culture creates expectations of efficiency and that technology itself becomes a dominant source of magic. This efficient technological magic is embodied in consumer goods.

Magical solutions are abundant in the market for weight loss products and the discussion above suggests that they should help consumers cope with stress by reconciling paradoxical
desires. Let’s examine the nature of magical solutions in the weight loss market before turning to an analysis of their manifestations in consumers’ weight loss stories. A first characteristic of magical solutions is the promise of instant results. Such promise is omnipresent in advertisements for weight loss products as illustrated in the ad presented in Figure 5.4 with its claim that: “This weekend, your scale will suddenly stop treating you like a number. Lose up to ten pounds in just two days.” This is an extraordinary contention considering that weight loss programs result on average in a one-pound loss per week (Wadden and Bartlett 1992) and that guidelines for safe weight loss usually recommend that consumers aim for a one- to two-pounds loss weekly (Larkin 1997). This advertising claim also echoes the notion of magical agency described earlier: control is externalized and reified in a scale and the consumer can influence the scale’s behavior by using the product.

Figure 5-4: Original Hollywood Celebrity Diet Advertisement
Second, magical solutions promise effortless results that do not require deprivation. This is a pervasive theme in advertising for weight loss products, as depicted in the advertisement for a protein bar presented in figure 5.5 and its enticement of “sinful, body-toning, chocolate!” Recall how the theme of morality described how fat is moralized in the social discourse: overweight represents the embodiment of one’s sins and atonement is expected in the form of deprivation (e.g., dieting). Magical solutions introduce a paradoxical answer to this dilemma in the form of a product that allows one to sin and atone simultaneously (“Just treat yourself to this sinfully delicious chocolate meal replacement and enjoy the head-turning, body-toning results!”). This claim cannot be reduced to an advantageous cost-benefit equation such as obtaining weight loss benefits without the usual associated costs of loss of pleasure; instead, the magical solution constitutes a proposition that is both sinful and body-toning at the same time. The paradoxical promise of a sinful, yet absolving product is made possible through the power of science and technology; this is evidenced through the names of the product (Meso-tech) and company (Muscletech R&D Inc) as well as the image of a molecule displayed on the product package. This finding is coherent with Thompson’s (2004) analysis of the juxtaposition of technocratic and romantic rhetoric in advertising for natural health products described earlier.
The notion of magical solutions – in the form of immediate and effortless solutions to weight loss – often appears in informants’ stories. When they speak of ‘magic,’ they are in fact alluding to magical solutions:

Everyone wants instant results. That’s the whole idea. And that’s what diets do, is to give you instant results. When you see instant results, it makes you want to do it more. That’s what makes you buy their program. That’s what makes you pay the fees, buy these magic pills, buy these magic weight loss patches. (Nicole)

That’s the kind of mentality I’m dealing with. I want magic. I want instant solution, I want to eat cake and watch DVDs and not be fat any more. I want to stop thinking like that. (Hello I am Fat, October 1, 2004)
Both women explicitly associate magic with instant outcomes; Nicole further depicts weight loss products as magical solutions – “magic pills” and “magic weight loss patches” – based on their promise of instant results. Noteworthy in consumers’ narratives, is the juxtaposition of the seductive allure of magical solutions and their inadequacy as a desirable approach to weight loss: Although the blogger admits the appeal of magical solutions (“I want magic”), she recognizes that they are an unproductive approach to weight loss (“I want to stop thinking like that”). Similarly, Nicole discusses how she refuses to rely on these approaches to lose weight: “I would like to lose forty pounds […] In doing so, I’m not going to do it the easy way, which is drugs or fad diets.” At the same time, she confesses a keen interest in new weight loss solutions; this is why she assiduously watches The Biggest Loser, a reality television show in which contestants employ extreme measure to lose the largest amount of weight:

I watch it. I’m still intrigued by it. I’m intrigued by any new thing that might come up because putting on weight is easy. Losing it is the hard thing. So I think for people that are overweight, when somebody can come out there with a very easy way to lose weight [laughs], your eyes are going to go to it. You’re going to listen. You’re going to look.

These findings suggest that technology infuses additional stress in consumers’ weight loss efforts. Technological advances engender constantly renewed promises of easy weight loss that consumers find seductive and intriguing, sometimes hopeful to find salvation in these products; yet, past experiences and failures contradicts these promises and consumers strive to remain critical of magical solutions and to resist the “mentality” they encourage. Importantly, consumers also describe their rejection of technology in moral terms, a point that is illustrated by Susan’s experience with a strict, doctor-supervised diet that involves thrice-weekly vitamin injections. Susan was initially drawn to this weight loss program after witnessing the dramatic results obtained by a television personality:
I had been watching the news and I’d seen a popular news personality. Every time I turned the TV on to see her news program she was smaller. And she was a very big girl to start with, very big girl. And I thought: “Holy smoke! What is she doing?” I thought the only thing that she can be doing to make a visible, you know, a really recognizable loss, is this Bernstein program. I’d heard a lot about it. It’s a very restrictive program but you get a lot of results in a short period of time.

Lured by the promise of fast results and the scientific aura of a doctor-supervised diet, Susan joined the program and lost sixty pounds in six months. At that point, however, her weight began to plateau and she experienced greater difficulty in reaching her goal weight. When a nurse suggested that she cuts out certain foods to trigger further weight loss, Susan became frustrated and abandoned the program:

Susan: I was very frustrated. I thought: “You know what? I’ve done some major work here. I’ve lost sixty pounds.” It was an unbelievable achievement. I went in for my checkup in the morning and I wasn’t burning ketones, which is the basis of the program. They check for ketones in your urine every [visit]. And if you weren’t burning ketones it meant, you know, you’d eaten something to stop the ketones from being produced so you’d have your fruit and bread withdrawn. And I thought: “You know, I’ve lost sixty pounds and you’re not going to tell me that I can’t eat my freakin’ apple for breakfast, you know? So I made the decision [...]. I discontinued.

Researcher: You completely stopped?

Susan: I completely stopped. Because I hadn’t achieved the… the little magic number determined for me to go on the maintenance program. I was seven pounds short of that number and understandably it’s set for a reason but…

This narrative juxtaposes Susan’s understanding of the scientific dimension of the weight loss program – based on “burning ketones” – with her moral expectation of retribution in which she expects an outcome that acknowledges her achievements so far (“I’ve lost sixty pounds and you’re not going to tell me that I can’t eat my freakin’ apple for breakfast”). She thus perceives the stricter requirements of the diet as unfair, as “punishment”: “[The nurse] said: ‘You’re not
burning your ketones. No bread and fruit.’ As a punishment, you know? And that’s how I felt. I felt I was being punished.”

These findings point to the limits of the use of technology by marketers: the appeal of technology fades when the principles of morality are violated. Indeed, weight loss products co-opt the idea of magical thinking by appropriating the themes of reification and externalization of control (e.g., “This weekend, your scale will suddenly stop treating you like a number.”). These products, however, evacuate the central moral dimension of magical thinking; for instance, they allow the consumer to lose weight without sacrifice (“sinful, body-toning chocolate”) or contradict expectations of retribution. Stivers (1999) expounds how technology transforms moral problems into technical problems:

[T]he moral categories of good and evil are transformed in the milieu of technology: the dominant metaphor of evil becomes ‘social problem’. [...] A problem is an obstacle, something to be solved or overcome. Social problems are not moral problems, but technical problems (p.27).

Magical solutions in the form of efficient, low-effort technological products (“magic pills,” “magic weight loss patches,” “magic-in-a-bottle,” “magical elixirs”) are seductive technical solutions to technical problems. However, consumers do not perceive these products as credible answers to moral problems since they displace moral dimensions.

5.3.3 Conclusion: Technology and Magical Thinking

Marketing practices surrounding weight loss products and consumers’ weight loss practices reveal interesting dimensions of the interaction between scientific and magical worldviews in the marketplace. On one hand, consumers co-opt technology to engage in magical thinking by investing numbers – in the form of body weight, body composition, clothing size, etc. – with meaningful, moral connotations and interpreting these numbers as a concrete
representation of their weight loss destination as well as objective signs from a reified entity that guides them along this moral journey.

On the other hand, marketers co-opt magical thinking by espousing the concepts of reification and externalization of control. In this discourse, technology provides seductive, low-effort magical solutions that resolve stressful paradoxes by eliminating moral obligations. Consumers are thus promised rapid and painless absolution (weight loss) from past sins (overeating, lack of exercise, etc.). This phenomenon corresponds most closely to common use of the term ‘magic’ in consumers’ narratives (e.g., “magic pills,” “magic weight loss patches”) and the consumer literature (e.g., “magic-in-a-bottle,” “magical elixirs”, Thompson 2004). Because they evacuate the central dimension of morality, magical solutions become incongruent with consumers’ construction of weight loss as moral striving.
Chapter 6
Conclusions and Implications

6.1 Contributions of the Research

The goal of this dissertation was to develop a meaning-making perspective of consumer coping through the analytical lens of magical thinking. Conceptual and managerial advances emerging from a magical thinking framework are discussed below.

6.1.1 What is Magical Thinking?

A first contribution of this research arises from the integration and extension of the literature on magical thinking. Although this task was mainly undertaken to develop our understanding of consumer coping, it also advances ideas on the nature and conceptual domain of magical thinking. Drawing on a multi-disciplinary literature, I defined magical thinking as creating or invoking ‘extraordinary’ connections – symbolic relationships founded on a belief or intuition in the presence of mystical forces in the world – in order to understand, predict, or influence events. Magical thinking is generally understood as a way to influence outcomes through symbolic means (Nemeroff and Rozin 2000; Stivers 1999), to “direct immaterial forces toward desired, practical ends” (Arnould, Price and Otnes 1999). The empirical examination of magical thinking in the context of coping with stressful weight loss projects provides additional insight into the nature of magical thinking in the marketplace. Specifically, magical thinking emerges as a set of practices that involves imparting moral meaning to a situation, reifying and externalizing one’s control over this situation, attempting to symbolically influence this mysterious, powerful entity that is vested with control, and interpreting events as objective signs from this entity.
Moralizing the issue – Magical thinking is anchored in the moral interpretation of the situation a consumer faces, which transforms a mundane domain of life into a battleground for asserting one’s moral worth. Moralization of overweight is grounded in a social discourse that interprets the body as a material representation of the self (Foucault 1978) and assumes that one is capable of and morally obliged to exert self-control over one’s body (Bordo 1993; Thompson and Hirshman 1995). Hence, fat is construed as the physical evidence of a person’s moral failings and weight loss acquires a symbolic value as a vehicle of transcendent self-transformation; weight loss is not simply about changing one’s body but it becomes a way to assert control or the appearance of control, to change one’s self and one’s life. Weight loss develops into moral striving.

This moral interpretation is akin to the concept of nontheistic sanctification, or investing life events with sacred qualities such as ultimate value and transcendence (Pargament and Mahoney 2005, 2002). Recent research in psychology has documented the role of sanctification as a meaning-making process in coping; for instance, Oates, Hall and Anderson (2005) analyzed working mothers’ sanctification of work, through experiencing a sense of calling, as a means of coping with experienced interrole tension. Whereas this research suggests that sanctification is a way to reduce stress by modifying the meaning of the stressful event, the present study provides evidence that this process can be a source of additional stress. Indeed, moralization of overweight intensifies the significance of this domain and hence its stressful dimension: “Anything would be better than being fat” (Nicole). Importantly, moralization of overweight also modifies the meaning of activities consumers engage in to cope with overweight, transforming weight loss activities into a pilgrimage, a moral journey. This emerges as an important step in establishing the relevance of invoking mystical forces to assist in weight loss, consistent with Ashforth and
Vaidyanath’s (2002) observation that “the more transcendent and ethereal the ends, the more individuals tend to sacralize the means” (p.365).

Reifying and externalizing control – Moralization establishes the transcendent significance of a given domain of life and attributes responsibility over this domain to the individual. The prevalence of weight loss activities as a vehicle for self-control in Western societies is well established (Bordo 1993). This relationship largely rests on a dualistic ideology that constructs an individual defined by self-control and a self to be controlled (Ogden 1997; Thompson and Hirschman 1995). Achieving and maintaining a desirable weight affirms a person’s ability to control her body, but it is also interpreted and experienced as a symbol of the person’s ability to exert control over other areas of her life. Yet, this dominant discourse of agency over one’s body weight coexists with observations that despite a plethora of weight loss approaches that can deliver short-term results, practical and generalized solutions to long-term maintenance remain elusive (Katz 2005; Jeffery et al. 2000).

Hence, consumers must cope with the moral responsibility to control an area of their life over which they possess limited agency. In this context, magical thinking emerges as a way to sustain hope in meeting social expectations of control by expanding the realm of the possible beyond a bleak, objective reality. Consumers thus construe their body and weight as influenced not only by physical, natural factors (genetic makeup, calorie consumption and expenditure, etc.) but also by immaterial, supernatural forces. This happens as they reify control over their body and project it onto various entities: a specific body part (e.g. “If I slide down that slope my mother’s genes are gonna take over and I’ll be plump”), an abstract presence that constrains their agency (e.g. “someone else is in control and I just have to surrender”) or gives them extraordinary powers (e.g. “there’s just something inside of you that just has to click”), an object that exerts an irresistible pull (e.g. the siren call of food). Reifying and externalizing control over their body
represents a coping resource in two ways: First, it broadens the scope of meaning-making beyond objective factors over which they experience limited control and, second, it grants an indirect form of agency as consumers attempt to symbolically influence the reified entity in control in order to bring forth desired ends.

*Symbolically influencing the entity in control* – Moralization of overweight and reification of control transform weight loss activities into a moral journey in which consumers summon benevolent forces and elude malicious ones to reach a desired destination. This negotiation with immaterial forces operates through symbolic action and presumes that the world is governed by a mystical order in which events occur for a reason and where moral action is rewarded and immoral action is punished. Hence, consumer narratives reveal how they prepare for the intervention of the reified entity (e.g., getting ready for the “click” that will ignite their ability to adhere to a weight loss program), attempt to ascertain and maintain the positive effects of this intervention (e.g., testing one’s sudden “magical ability” to resist tempting foods; trying not to “jinx” a bout of weight loss), expect retribution in the form of reward for symbolic, moral actions (e.g., feeling entitled to lose weight for “just having to deal” with the deprivation of dieting), and hope for miraculous salvation in market offerings (e.g., a private chef that would eliminate confusion in choice by telling the dieter what to eat, a trip that would help a women “shed her skin”).

*Searching for signs* – Magical thinking relies on symbolic action to achieve desired ends. In this process, consumers seek objective signs that confirm the effectiveness of their symbolic influence over the reified entity in control. To this end, consumers co-opt a scientific world view by relying on numerical signs (e.g., body weight or measurements, clothing size) as markers along their moral journey. Numbers thus acquire veridical power, confirming the effect of immaterial forces on consumers’ reality. Consumers trust the message conveyed by numbers,
even when they know the number was obtained artificially (e.g., weighing oneself while wearing heavier or lighter clothing) and achieving a certain numerical milestone is vested with special meaning (e.g., reaching “onederland”).

In sum, this research suggests that magical thinking constitutes a coping resource through which consumers first create ‘extraordinary connections’ that externalize and reify the meaning of an event and control over this event, and then negotiate with the reified mystical force. Magical thinking expands the realm of the possible to assist consumers in coping with the moral responsibility for a domain over which they experience limited agency.

6.1.2 Between Reality and Fantasy: Coping and the Realm of Possibility

Theorizing in the field of psychology generally emphasizes how magical thinking opposes scientific thinking (Nemeroff and Rozin 2000); magical thinking is thus understood as a misconception of reality, as fallacious reasoning or reasoning on the basis of erroneous beliefs (Alcock 1995; Woolley 1997; Vyse 1997; Zusne and Jones 1989). In contrast, some researchers stress the creative dimension of magical thinking. For instance, Johnson (1997) propose a conceptualization of magical (fantastical) thinking as “the construction of alternative realities which intentionally violate the intuitive constraints of our ordinary understanding” (p.1025), realities that are “purposely fantastic” (ibid.). The present research advances an alternative position wherein magical thinking constitutes a coping resource that expands the realm of the possible beyond the constraints of an objective reality that conflicts with consumers’ desires. Magical thinking thus creates a space of possibility situated somewhere between reality and fantasy.

The analysis presented herein suggests that, contrary to conceptualizations in the area of psychology (e.g., Eckblad and Chapman 1983; Hippler 1977; Nemeroff and Rozin 2000; Zusne and Jones 1989), the defining characteristic of magical thinking should not be understood in
terms of beliefs in the mysterious forces evoked. Indeed, the concept of belief corresponds to a pronouncement that something exists in reality; consumer narratives reveal that magical thinking does not entail such ontological judgment but instead pertains to the construction of a realm of possibility. This compels us to consider that the distinction between magical thinking and scientific thinking does not lie in a different ability to distinguish reality and fantasy, but in a different position towards the possible: Whereas scientific thinking seeks to empirically validate or invalidate possibilities to classify them as reality or fantasy, magical thinking creates and maintains ambiguity around what is possible in order to provide meaning and sustain hope in the context of stressful situations. Contrary to prior research suggesting that uncertainty is a source of stress that triggers coping mechanisms, including some forms of magical thinking (Vyse 1997), this study reveals situations in which consumers engage in magical thinking to create and maintain uncertainty in order to cope with stressful events. This was apparent, for example, when women hypostatized their genes or metabolism and attempted to symbolically influence these reified entities in order to lose weight. Physical factors, such as a genetic predisposition towards overweight, are generally considered as inalterable constraints. Reifying these factors and symbolically negotiating with the reified forces creates uncertainty around their inexorable impact on one’s weight: Whereas it was originally impossible for the consumer to control these factors, she now gains an uncertain but possible influence over them. Uncertainty thus becomes a source of hope since it transforms impossibilities into possibilities (MacInnis and DeMello 2005). Participants’ narratives also revealed numerous instances wherein they cast doubt regarding the certainty of their knowledge about weight loss. Consider Nicole’s description of her interest in the television program The Biggest Loser, a reality show where contestants compete to achieve maximum weight loss:
But see, they got me watching the program, looking for tips, looking for… And I know it’s the exercise. And I know it’s the proper diet. […] But I watch it. I’m still intrigued by it. I’m intrigued by any new thing that might come up. You know, because… putting on weight is very easy. Losing it is the hard thing. So, I think for people that are overweight when somebody can come out there with a very easy way [laughs] to lose weight, your eyes are going to go to it. You’re going to listen, you’re going to look.

Nicole’s discourse suggests that she is confident in her weight loss knowledge (“And I know it’s the exercise. And I know it’s the proper diet.”), yet she simultaneously recognizes that it might not be complete, being “intrigued by any new thing that might come up.” Similarly, Jennifer expressed skepticism regarding a certain weight loss supplement prescribed on her diet: “The herbal supplements are supposed to curb your appetite and speed up your metabolism, stuff like that. If I was to be honest, as far as curbing my appetite, I honestly don’t think so much.” She nevertheless planned to continue complying with the recommended supplementation: “There is six months of maintenance and then it’s just the one pill, *Chro-Magic*, chromium. So I’ll take it. […] One woman, she’s lost fifty-some pounds and she said that she still takes the chromium everyday.” These examples speak to the seductive nature of magical solutions; participants do not express a belief in these weight loss methods but in the possibility that they might work.

The construct of magical thinking is also relevant to experiential research on consumers’ negotiation of the boundary between reality and fantasy, which has documented how consumption sometimes involves a blending, blurring, or merging of reality and fantasy (e.g., Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets et al. 2004; Peñaloza 2001). Consumer researchers have primarily focused on understanding consumers’ willingness to suspend their disbelief and to actively invoke their imagination in the context of hedonic, leisure- or fictionally-oriented marketing settings such as historic reenactment (Belk and Costa 1998), tourist attractions (Grayson and Martinec 2004), spectacular, themed retailed environment (Kozinets et al. 2004), and river rafting
(Arnould and Price 1993; Arnould et al. 1999). The present study contributes to this area of research by proposing magical thinking as a process through which consumers construct and evoke a realm of possibility that lies between reality and fantasy in order to cope with stressful events. In contrast to the fantastic, which is not bound to reality (Martin 2004), magical thinking is inherently tied to consumers’ everyday reality since it is directed towards the materialization of practical ends. Yet, magical thinking allows consumers to reach beyond a mundane reality that constrains the realization of their desires and to invoke mystical forces. In the process, magical thinking injects hope and meaning to consumers’ attempts to cope with stressful life situations.

Consider the metaphor employed to describe dieters in one woman’s weight loss memoirs:

   Dieting fat girls are always kind of like superheroes in their own fat girl stories. Of course, the fat part is the alter ego: the Clark Kent or the Diana Prince to the super-sexy spandex wonder of a woman the fat girl is one day meant to be, if she’s to be anyone at all. (Jennifer Weiner, I’m Not the New Me, p.13)

The process of reification of control and symbolic negotiation with mystical forces creates a meaningful narrative that modifies the nature of weight loss activities from goal-directed behavior (e.g., Bagozzi and Dholakia 1999) subjected to physical and natural constraints to a morally-charged quest for self-transformation. Losing weight should thus be understood as an identity project that transcends mere physical changes (becoming a “super-sexy spandex wonder of a woman”); this project acquires even more significance since it is perceived as extending beyond one’s own desire (becoming the woman she “is one day meant to be”).

6.1.3 Morality, Coping, and Consumption

This research underscores the strong moral dimension of magical thinking, which invokes a meaningful universe ruled by some mystical order where good deeds are rewarded and transgressions are punished. Consequently, its findings provide insight into the role of morality in consumption.
Consumer research suggests that moral beliefs serve as goals that guide consumption activities (Belk et al. 2003; Kozinets and Handelman 2004) and that religious and magical motives supply consumers with narrative structures, which provide meaning and re-enchant consumers’ world (Muniz and Schau 2005). In particular, Muniz and Schau (2005) assert that the presence of supernatural, religious, and magical motifs in consumers’ narratives is “indicative of the very clear and resilient need humans have to believe in something or someone outside mundane reality” (p.739). My findings flesh out some of the ultimate and instrumental roles these beliefs play in consumers’ identity projects, thus providing fresh insight into the moral dimension of coping which, to date, has largely been articulated in terms of religious beliefs (e.g., Pargament 1997). Magical thinking modifies the meaning of consumers’ experiences and alters what is possible to achieve by blurring the distinction between the mundane and the mystical. Building on this perspective, I find that by engaging in magical thinking, consumers transform coping with stressful events into moral strivings and impart meaningful narratives to their identity project: Weight loss is construed as a pilgrimage to a magical destination; the overweight body is a traitor who lies about the true self and the dieter becomes a superhero who will defeat this traitor. However, a magical thinking framework also reveals ways in which consumers use moral beliefs as means to act on the stressful event. This compels us to consider that behaving in accordance with moral beliefs is not only an end in itself but a way for consumers to attempt bringing forth desired ends, through expectations of retribution for moral action and hope for salvation.

6.1.4 Interplay between Magic and Science

The moral facet of magical thinking also informs our understanding of the relationship between magic and science. Investigating magical rituals in white-water river rafting, Arnould et al. (1999) propose that the resurgence of magic in postmodernity is associated with consumers’ growing incredulity regarding the promise of science. The present study suggests that this
incredulity in part stems from the fact that the promises of science, embodied in products, evacuate the dimension of morality and transform moral problems into technical ones. These products are undoubtedly seductive and most informants admit having tried several diets and weight loss aids over the years; yet consumers explain their discontent with such products not only because they fail to deliver promised results, but also because such products come to be void of morality. This is illustrated, for instance, in Susan’s decision to abandon a doctor-supervised diet when continued weight loss requires a strict adherence that she interprets as unfair punishment in light of her past efforts and success. Although she was initially attracted to the rigorous, scientific tenets of this weight loss method, she ultimately finds it unsatisfying as it fails to cohere with her moral universe. Berman (1981) asserts that “scientific consciousness is alienated consciousness” (p. 17) and that the scientific worldview dominating contemporary life is characterized by a loss of meaning, a separation of the individual from nature, the cosmos, and community. Consumers’ narratives reveal how magical thinking helps consumers to cope with this loss of meaning by weaving a moral fabric around market offerings and their own consumption practices.

At the same time, science plays an important role in magical thinking as consumer narratives are replete with scientific terms – numbers, statistics, percentages, etc. In a cultural context where science has attained a sacred status (Stivers 1999), consumers employ such scientific criteria as objective signs of the effectiveness of their symbolic action to influence mystical forces as well as markers along their moral journey. In engaging in magical thinking, consumers thus display a creative manipulation of scientific and moral meanings, which compels us to consider implications of for our understanding of consumer agency; this is discussed next.
6.1.5 Magical Thinking and Consumer Agency

Ahearn (2001) broadly defines agency as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (p.112), noting that studying agency is to “investigate how practices can either reproduce or transform the very structure that shape them” (ibid.). Consumer agency is often defined more specifically as consumers’ capacity to creatively alter, transform, and play with meanings in the marketplace (Adkins and Ozanne 2005b; Ger and Belk 1996). Studying consumer agency thus entails examining how consumers either reproduce or transform marketplace meanings.

Consumer agency is increasingly construed as dialectic rather than dichotomous, emphasizing processes by which meaning is co-created by consumers and marketers (Kozinets et al. 2004). Whereas research in the field of Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005) emphasizes a conceptualization of agency in terms of meaning creation, a psychological perspective generally equates agency with “controlling the world” (Rothbaum, Weisz and Snyder 1982) – that is, controlling one’s social or physical environment – through overt behavior. This view thus resonates with definitions of magical thinking as “achieving the appearance of control in the absence of real control [when] there is no normal means of securing the desired outcome” (Bolton et al. 2002, p.482). The premise underlying psychological frameworks of agency and magical thinking is a basic need for individuals to feel in control of their lives and their environment (Polivy and Herman 2000; Rothbaum, Weisz and Snyder 1982): “[I]t is critical to living beings to experience control over what matters to them, the alternative being anxiety and helplessness, with consequent giving up of action.” (Bolton et al. 2002, p.482). Hence, magical thinking is construed as a means to cope with uncertainty and stress, which constitute threats to perceived control (Keinan 1994; Zusne and Jones 1989).

The present study questions the centrality of individual preference for perceived control by illustrating how cultural expectations of self-control are often experienced as stressful and how
consumers sometimes wish to relinquish control to mysterious forces. From this perspective, engaging in magical thinking should not simply be interpreted as a form of illusory control reflecting individual need to control outcomes (Rothbaum, Weisz and Snyder 1982) but as a way to cope with social pressures to exhibit control and to imbue consumption practices – such as weight loss activities – with meaning.

Consumer weight loss narratives denote considerable knowledge related to weight control and a skeptical, sometimes critical assessment of market offerings that promise rapid, effortless results. As stated earlier, these findings contradict a view of magical thinking limited to cognitive error and magical thinking emerges as a creative process that allows consumers to gain agency – albeit a symbolic form of agency mediated through persuasion of reified forces – in the face of stressful events. Although the literature has examined how consumers cope with marketers’ persuasion attempts (Friestad and Wright 1994), magical thinking contributes to our understanding of ways in which consumers also engage in persuasion attempts. This agentic process should nevertheless be interpreted within the context of strong structural forces. Indeed, research suggests that consumers’ preoccupation with their weight is closely tied to a cultural context that gives rise to a moral obligation of self-control through body regulation (Bordo 1993; Germov and Williams 1999; Hesse-Biber 1996; Thompson and Hirschman 1995). The consumer participates in this body cathexis wherein the body is first construed as a symbol of self-control, a symbol that eventually acquires indexical value as the consumer perceives that her ability to control her weight affects her agency over other, seemingly unrelated area of her life. Yet, a person’s ability to lose weight is constrained by numerous factors outside the person’s control (e.g., genetic makeup, metabolism, etc.).

The present research thus speaks to consumers’ need to cope with a cultural context in which they are held responsible for a domain over which they have limited agency. In this
context, the notion of magical agency was defined as consumers’ practice of negotiating with mystical, reified forces in the process of achieving desired ends, summoning auspicious forces that support consumers’ desires and eluding adverse forces that oppose them. The concept of magical thinking thus informs our understanding of consumer agency by providing analytic linkages between the micro and macro level of analysis – that is, between individual agency and market structure (Schor 2007) – through a depiction of forms of personal freedom in identity projects that ultimately reproduce broader consumption outcomes: By engaging in magical thinking, consumers gain a symbolic form of agency in transforming the personal meaning of weight loss and in attempting to transcend physical constraints. At the same time, magical thinking contributes to reproducing and reinforcing cultural meanings related to body size and to the centrality of personal control in identity projects as consumers not only accept responsibility to conform to (sometimes unrealistic) socially-desirable body ideals but also imbue this project as a special domain to express self-control. Together, these findings document instances of consumer agency within structural boundaries, or “sign experimentation” within a system of “sign domination” (Murray 2002). Although this study was conducted in the context of weight loss activities, cultural expectation of self-control over and personal responsibility for one’s life outcome is a dominant theme in North America (Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg 2005) and extends to several domains of consumers’ lives, including health (e.g., Brandt 1997; Petersen 1997) and professional success (e.g., Christopher and Schlenker 2005).

6.1.6 Further Implications for Public Policy

In addition to the theoretical contributions outlined above, this study’s findings should be directly of interest to actors in the domain of consumer advocacy and public policy. Conceptual and practical approaches related to social issues such as obesity and overweight, health, gambling, and compulsive shopping often conceptualize these issues as individual problems
associated with erroneous beliefs and lack of self-control. For instance, U.S. Food and Drug Administration attempts to rectify consumers’ misconceptions regarding weight loss products by warning them against “magic bullet for weight loss” (http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/wgtloss.html) and the Responsible Gambling Council seeks to prevent and counter problem gambling by debunking common gambling myths (see Figure 6.1).

**Figure 6.1**

**Excerpt from the Responsible Gambling Council’s Friends4friends Website**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Myths about gambling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The fact is that in the long run gambling will cost you money. There are beliefs that can make people believe that they can influence the outcome and win.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myth: If I keep gambling my luck is going to change. I’ll win back the money I’ve lost if I just keep gambling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truth: The outcome each time you gamble is completely independent from any other time, so your odds are no more in your favour on your first bet as they are on your tenth. Over time, risking more and more will only create greater losses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myth: I almost won. This means that I am due for a win.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truth: Just about winning does not mean that a win is around the corner. What happens in the future is in no way influenced by a near win.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myth: I have a feeling this is my lucky day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truth: Hoping, wishing or needing to win has no influence on the outcome.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: [http://www.friends4friends.ca](http://www.friends4friends.ca)

Furthermore, the Responsible Gambling Council ([http://www.friends4friends.ca](http://www.friends4friends.ca)) provides a definition of problem gambling in terms of lack of control: “A person has a gambling problem when he/she loses control over their gambling.” This definition is consistent with recent consumer research that construes lack of control as a central dimension of consumer vulnerability (Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg 2005).
The present research suggests that consumers evoke alternative realities as a refuge and a source of hope in coping with cultural expectations of control. Hence, programs directed at correcting fallacious consumer knowledge and enjoining consumers to exert greater self-control activities might be of limited value. This conclusion is consistent with Starr’s (2007) observations on the problems of emphasizing the individual cognitive dimension of social problems:

The danger here is that, by attributing to cognition things that arise from life in culture, policy conclusions may only superficially address underlying problems. Thus, for example, recent discussion of using “benevolent paternalism” to save people from their own self-control problems (e.g., by obliging them to save into 401(k) plans) may be seriously misguided if cognition per se is not the underlying source of self-control problem. (p.215)

Based on the present study’s findings, a productive step might be to re-conceptualize “self-control problems” in terms of consumers’ attempts to cope with cultural expectations rather than cognitive problems. For instance, Baker, Gentry and Ritenburg (2005) note that:

When a culture places a premium on an individual’s ability to control his or her environment, as American culture does, and the consumer internalizes this desire for control, not being able to control the environment is an unwelcome reminder of the frailties of the individual and indeed of humanity. This reminder and the lack of control contribute to the experience of consumer vulnerability (p.132)

Instead of focusing exclusively on strategies that seek to reinforce consumers’ ability to control their environment, it might be constructive to explore ways to encourage greater consumer agency through the development of a critical stance towards the cultural myths that shape their consumption experiences and coping strategies. Arguing for critical consumer education for stigmatized, vulnerable consumers, Adkins and Ozanne (2005a) note:
Consumer agency and empowerment assumes an understanding of one’s potential for action within a social structure. Social actors must understand that social ideas get fixed into social structures; they must be able to reflect on these social objects as being based on various social interests; and, finally, they must be able to act socially in their own self-interest. (p.158)

The present study suggests that critical consumer education might entail a shift from approaches focusing on cognitive dimensions and self-control towards an emphasis on arming consumers with the ability to question and explode cultural meanings that they experience as stressful. In the domain of weight loss, for instance, public policy initiatives often seek to discourage consumers from succumbing to unrealistic product promises and distorted decision-making (Cleland et al. 1998, 2002). As a result, these approaches eliminate certain consumer coping strategies without affecting the source of stress – the juxtaposition of cultural ideals of thinness and physical factors that constrain weight loss. In contrast, a critical approach would encourage greater consumer agency through the development of consumers’ ability to recognize and transform the meanings associated with weight and ultimately, with self-control.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research

Despite the contributions claimed above, it is necessary to interpret conclusions in light of the philosophical and methodological approaches that guided this research. The hermeneutical method adopted here was relevant to our objective of gaining insight into meaning construction in consumer coping since this method “focuses on the ways in which people use cultural meanings and consumption practices to manage issues of identity and the multitude of tensions and threats to a coherent sense of self that are posed by the conditions of modern life” (Thompson 1997, p.451). Grounded in an interpretive, humanistic perspective (Hirschman 1986; Hudson and Ozanne 1988), this research thus sought to describe consumers’ lived experience and the meanings that emerge from them. Although findings illuminate broad issues related to consumer
coping, it is important to remember that my analysis remains inherently anchored in the context of weight control consumption activities of Occidental, middle-class women; my focus was particularistic rather than generalistic (Hudson and Ozanne 1988). In this sense, two characteristics of the study context warrant consideration and suggest avenues for future research.

First, this study was conducted in the context of weight loss consumption activities, chosen because it presents rich and complex issues related to stress and coping. My analysis of magical thinking in this context permits the identification of other consumption domains presenting similar characteristics; while the approach adopted does not seek generalization to these domains, it nevertheless proposes useful explanations that could be fruitfully explored. For instance, one could establish a parallel between the cultural ideal of the slender body (Bordo 1993; Thompson and Hirschman 1995) and that of the successful, “self-made man” (Cawelti 1989): Both are constructed on the premise that anyone can achieve self-transformation (“fat to thin” stories based on assumptions of weight malleability versus “rags to riches” stories based on assumptions of social mobility), provided one exerts sufficient self-control, discipline and hard work. Similarly, marketers offer magical solutions as vehicle of self-transformation in both instances – products that promise quick, easy weight loss versus “get rich quick” schemes. Yet, individual hope to achieve these ideals is constrained by numerous physical, psychological, and social factors. Comparing and contrasting this study’s findings with an examination of magical thinking in the context of coping with expectations of professional and financial success could further deepen our knowledge in this area. It would also afford an opportunity to investigate questions raised in the literature (e.g., Vyse 1997) regarding possible gender differences in the predominance and forms of magical thinking among men and women. Indeed, a thin body remains largely a feminine ideal in Western culture (Bordo 1993; Hesse-Biber 1996; McKinley
1999) whereas the myth of success plays a dominant role in American models of masculinity (Holt and Thompson 2004).

Second, this study examines magical thinking in a contemporary Western cultural context characterized by a dualistic worldview that encourages expectations of self-control (Thompson and Hirschman 1995). Other cultural milieus, however, favor different views of agency and personal responsibility. For instance, Morris, Menon and Ames (2001) note that, whereas American culture promotes a conception of agentic individual persons, Chinese culture privileges a conception of agentic collectivities that emphasizes families, groups, and organizations. Examining magical thinking in an environment where the boundary between objectivity and subjectivity is construed in a more porous manner and where less emphasis is place on personal control over life circumstances might reveal different forms and role of magical thinking. In particular, such a cultural context would be amenable to the emergence of magical thinking as a form of participation in the world rather than as attempts to control the world (Stivers 1999).

6.3 Conclusion

This dissertation advances our understanding of consumer coping by employing a magical thinking perspective of meaning. An interpretive exploration of consumer coping in the context of weight loss activities suggests that consumers engage in magical thinking to cope with the moral responsibility for a domain over which they experience limited agency by expanding the realm of the possible. This occurs as consumers first create ‘extraordinary connections’ that externalize and reify the meaning of an event and control over this event, and then negotiate with the reified mystical force in order to bring forth desired ends and elude negative outcomes.

By employing comparatively nontraditional approach to study coping and magical thinking, this research allows us to step back from dominant psychological paradigms that have been employed in studying these constructs. It also builds on and extends important domains of
research in Consumer Culture Theory, including magical consumption experiences, consumers’ negotiation of the boundary between reality and fantasy, consumer agency, morality and consumption.
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