

Collecting as routine human behavior: motivations for identity and control in the material and digital world.

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Abstract

The human desire to collect possessions has been long recognized in historical and cultural studies. Individual collecting however has been addressed primarily through the lens of extreme conditions such as hoarding. An interdisciplinary research literature has emerged in the later decades of the 20th Century which moves our understanding and focus from the psychoanalytic study of inner drives to the empirical study of objects in identity presentation and group membership. The normalization of collecting as a human activity offers a richer understanding of our relationship to objects through time and can explain the emergence of digital collectibles in recent times.

Keywords Collecting, presentation of self, collectible objects, motivations, values.

Introduction

Hunting-gathering is considered an early adaption of humans to the world, and for the majority of our species' history, is how humans existed. Over time, the gradual shift from hunting and scavenging to a more pastoral, agricultural existence, and from there to a competing urban, industrial model, has marked the sweep of global progress.¹ A constant throughout has been the human desire to acquire and control resources. At a fundamental level, gathering or collecting objects of all kinds is part of human psychology but our understanding of this in a theoretical and scholarly sense remains limited.

Great collections of objects have marked societies for millennia. From the loot of war to the crown jewels of monarchs, material possessions have been an important measure of power and influence. While the concept of a museum bringing together collections of objects for display is a comparatively recent development, often tied to the de Medici collection of 15th century Florence, peoples have gathered and displayed valued objects for millennia. The great museum of Alexandria dates to the 3rd century BCE, but Paleolithic collections have been discovered that demonstrate humans gathered important objects together thousands of years earlier, not just to assist the dead in the afterlife but to serve as educational resources, records of travel or trade, and as a demonstration of wealth.²

Social scientists and historians interested in the human tendency to collect and display objects have adopted multiple theoretical lenses to explore this behavior, and generally draw a firm distinction between collecting and hoarding. The consensus suggests that collecting is motivated by multiple variables, many but not all of which can be articulated by the individual in terms of interest, identity and the provision of personal satisfaction or pleasure. Hoarding, however, is viewed to be more of a disorder, driven by

unconscious, anxiety related drives, often tied to insecurity, that can negatively impact an individual's quality of life and requires specialist intervention to address.³

The collecting versus hoarding distinction is not firm however. The majority of humans display an ability to gather and save items, even temporarily, for future use of consumption, only a few people manifest a tendency to hoard items to the point of threatening their own health or safety. It is the middle space, the deferment from immediate consumption or disposal with the primary purpose being display or retaining for pleasure that will be considered the sphere of collecting in the present paper. The intent here is to understand why humans collect, how scholars study and understand this behavior, and how human collecting may be impacted by the shift from material to digital infrastructures in our world.

This paper considers collecting as a naturally occurring, routine phenomenon in the lives of individuals, and in so doing to offer a different emphasis from the dominant cultural studies orientations of scholars⁴ who offer analyses primarily of large institutional collections (such as found in galleries or museums). In so doing, this paper also represents a tack from the analysis and value of what gets collected (e.g., paintings, statuary, or antiques for example) toward a direct consideration of the motives and behaviors of individuals who collect for themselves. While there have been case studies of such people which tend to emphasize the unusual or idiosyncratic aspects of extreme collecting behaviors,⁵ this paper focuses on the more rational, psychological dynamics that underscore a typical person's interest and pursuit of objects or material that forms their collection. While this distinction is not firm in the literature, and most treatments of collecting at least allude to individual motivations across time, the present paper seeks to address specifically the nature of collecting in everyday human terms, and how it can be understood and studied in terms of routine human life and activity.

Conditions for the process of collecting

The modern notion of the collector, one who accumulates objects for pleasure, display or perhaps other unconscious motivations than consumption or survival need, is tied to the emergence of disposable wealth. Naturally limited in earlier times to the powerful, ruling classes, historians of cultural practices point to increased prosperity and the consequent emergence of leisure time as creating the necessary conditions for collecting to emerge among the general population. Most histories of collecting or museums reference the late C16th European 'cabinets of curiosities', common mainly among scholars (of means) who would gather specimens of natural history, relics, art, antiquities and such for display.

The collections had few clearly delineated boundaries for inclusion other than an item be unusual. As Krysztof Pomian puts it, the cabinets housed anything 'rare, exceptional, extraordinary, exotic (or) monstrous.'⁶ (p21) Such cabinets (which literally could be cabinets but also, if warranted, whole rooms) served many purposes, from

advancement of scientific research to propaganda, denoting an individual's personal control over some part of the world, as claimed by Thomas⁷ of the cabinet owned by King Charles I of England.

Russell Belk⁸ argues that accepted historical accounts of early collections often ignore the relatively widespread collecting of objects among ordinary members of more primitive societies, evidence of which suggests that people have always gathered items for more than subsistence purposes. That said, the emergence of a consumer society certainly mirrors our modern understandings of collecting and Belk⁹ acknowledges Kathleen Rassuli's and Stanley Hollander's¹⁰ outline of four conditions required to produce the conditions for collecting:

1. People having sufficient means
2. Consuming via trade rather than self-production
3. Cultural acceptance of collecting as acceptable
4. Judgement of self and others based on consumption¹¹

While one can appreciate the economic nature of the first condition and the pragmatic aspect of the second (why collect an object that one can make for oneself?), the last two conditions are subtler, and point to what might be described here as the sociological and psychological conditions for collecting. Belk¹² argues that a key shift occurred with the dual emergence of the consumer society and the manufacturing of sufficient goods that pivots heavily on the driving force of envy in society. According to this argument, where goods were limited, people would seek to avoid generating envy by the public display of possessions. When goods became more plentiful, however, possessions started to be employed intentionally to provoke envy, being used to display wealth, taste, success and distinction. Belk¹³ ties this shift to the sweeping changes in social norms and the dynamics of emerging class and political systems challenged by or enabled through increased exploration, migration and wealth distribution.

While it is difficult to formally test Belk's¹⁴ thesis, it is clear that the shift in consumption enabled by increased economic riches resulted in the human practice of acquiring goods emerging both as a subject of study in itself and a method of analyzing the social world. Theories of business and advertising conceived in the 20th century sought to explain desire, pricing, choice and purchasing (see e.g. Alan Trachtenberg, 1982)¹⁵, and this ties with the growth of availability and choice of products in this era. Regardless of the timeline, goods and possessions became a focus for social science research as noted by Susan Bean (1987)¹⁶ who describes early anthropology as a field based entirely on the study of collecting and exhibiting to shed light on cultural practices and values of societies.

Such framings emphasize the broader contextual practices of consumption and status, and provide historical, economic and sociological lenses on the nature of goods

and their value in our world. This is a rich literature that weaves complex threads over time, as explored by Belk,¹⁷ Susan Pearce,¹⁸ John Elsner and Roger Cardinal¹⁹(1997) and others. These scholars have produced significant works on the culture of consumption, the mission and operation of museums and galleries, and the politics of values. In the present paper, the concern is less with these larger social or cultural analyses and more with the nature of collecting as experienced by individuals. This places emphasis on people and their experiences, largely independent of organizational or institutional concerns. In so doing, I acknowledge that social and cultural contexts imbue individual collector concerns but the goal is to turn the focus on the collector rather than the collected, and on the personal motivations of those who view their collections and behavior as routine rather than extreme.

Conceptions of the collector

While formal study of the psychology of collecting is a relatively recent phenomenon, its origins can be found in a diverse literature of reflections about the nature of collecting and the practices of those servicing and in some cases manufacturing the demand for collectibles, namely antique collectors or art dealers. These early accounts offer a fascinating insight into the history of collecting as an organized process. Sir James Yoxall²⁰ provides a personal description of the business of antique collecting in England, with emphasis on the pitfalls of dealing with the professional auctioneers and dealers of this era, many of whom seemed to collude for personal profit at the expense of individuals. He describes the ‘knock-out’, a shady practice whereby a group of dealers agree not to bid on desirable items in order to allow one member to purchase at a favorable price, only to privately handle bidding among themselves later. The losers here of course are the seller and the auctioneer, if the latter is not in fact in on the trick. In perhaps a revealing comment on the insiders’ views of collectors, Yoxall²¹ uses the term ‘collector’s piece’ not to refer to a high quality item in the way outsiders might usually employ the label but as a cynical dealers’ code for ‘the ordinary, handsome, costly specimen, sought after by moneyed buyers.’²² (p21).

This conception of collectors as foes rather than friends of dealers is consistent throughout the last century and permeates both early and more recent accounts from those within the dealer community. Charles Rowed’s ‘Collecting as a Pastime’ from 1920²³ speaks to a general distrust between collectors and dealers, which he argues is entirely mutual, citing examples of collectors taking advantage of uninformed dealers (including the rather humorous story of a buyer who demanded a discount from a presumed unaware dealer when negotiating the purchase of a statue of Admiral Nelson on the grounds that it only had one arm!). However, such examples of dealers being manipulated by collectors are rare, with most anecdotes from those describing the auctioneering and dealer world indicating continual dealer profiteering at the expense of uninformed buyers.

More recent historical accounts of the great auction houses such as Sotheby's and Christie's read less like organizational histories than novels of intrigue, replete with accounts of price manipulation, collusion, and even international smuggling, not all of which can be fully documented but which point to the ongoing sense of collectors as the somewhat foolhardy participants in a game where they cannot determine all the rules. Clearly price fixing and antitrust actions have been brought against both houses, with Sotheby's and Christie's both fined for commission fixing in 2000²⁴ but these are hardly rarities in any field of commerce. What Robert Lacey's²⁵ account of Sotheby's history presents is a view of the auction houses serving as a vehicle to curate taste, fashion and desire in order to maximize profit on the trade of artifacts. In so doing, they play on the insecurities and greed of certain consumers who, in Lacey's phrase, are 'bidding for class' when buying at auction. Thus, while times and fashions change, the collector seems to be consistently viewed within the auctioneering world primarily as a profit source, motivated by their own greed and self-aggrandizement, fit largely to be sold what they are told is important without recourse to any objective determinant of value.²⁶

This telling of the commercial exploitation of those interested in objects can be extended to Belk's critique of contemporary museum culture which he argues has become Disney-fied in a marketing-oriented effort to attract paying 'customers' to exhibitions. Indeed, much of contemporary museum discourse is now expressed in terms of the 'user-experience,'²⁷ the creation of an immersive engagement with objects and spaces that is likened to the design of modern consumer products. Thus, in one sense, such a framing of collectors is little different than any business-oriented treatment of customers, people to be sold items or services for profit and encouraged to spend based on a marketed ideal of objects and value. Without disputing the business argument for understanding collectors as such, it does present discourse more in the overly narrow 'collector as customer' mold. While that is certainly one legitimate framing, this approach fails to address important distinctive characteristics of collectors, or to examine what separates them from stereotypical customers. To this end, we turn to research seeking to understand the psychological dynamics of collecting behavior and experiences.

Defining the collector: problems and limitations

Perhaps surprisingly, given the attention to collecting and the consumer, there is a noticeable lack of formal definition of what constitutes a collector, particularly in the scholarly literature directly tackling the topic of collecting in human history. Eisner and Cardinal's well-received *The Cultures of Collecting*²⁸ offers twelve critical essays by leading academics, curators and collectors on the nature of collecting as a human and social phenomenon in a landmark text. The work deals explicitly with collections and collecting, but never actually provides a definition of the collector, suggesting only that any collection must be the product of a collector, hence any definitions must emerge from

the study of collections and collecting. One can hardly disagree but they fail to provide one nonetheless. Similar observations pertain to other influential works such as Pearce's *On Collecting*,²⁹ a superb treatment of the collecting process and dominant thoughts on curation in European history, but a book which focuses on broad thematic treatment through time rather than the drivers of individual action.

A more direct treatment of the meaning of 'collector' can be found in the anthropological, cultural history, and business literatures, and while no one definition enjoys universal recognition, there seems to be some agreement on what is meant when a person is described as a collector. Belk³⁰ sets collecting in the context of typical western patterns of identifying, selecting, obtaining, using and disposing of goods, the cyclical process of engaging with material objects in capitalist society. From here, he argues that a collector deviates from the norm by rarely using and certainly not disposing of the goods or objects in the same way a typical consumer might, instead treating their continual acquisition and maintained presence as the partial end-goal even as the cycle repeats.

This emphasis on the non-consumptive and retention acts of collectors is invoked specifically in William McIntosh and Brandon Schmeichel's³¹ popular definition of the collector as 'a person motivated to accumulate a series of similar objects where the instrumental function of the objects is of secondary (or no) concern, and the person does not plan to immediately dispose of the objects.'³²

This type of definition seems intuitively sensible and thus has been widely adopted in the literature but it is hardly robust when examined critically across collection types. McIntosh and Schmeichel³³ explicitly argue that someone with a book collection who does not read but intends to sell them, for example, is not defined as a collector. They argue for this critical distinction based on 'non-use' across multiple types of collection, such as people who collect art, or bottle caps or toasters. In their construal, if a person does not actually make toast with their toasters, or cap bottles etc., then they are to be deemed collectors. Though not stated explicitly, one logical presumption of this definition is that using an item for its intended purpose then makes one something other than a collector, presumably a 'user'.

While this may hold for some object types, the question of use or non-use is no simple delimiter. It makes little sense to employ this to distinguish dealers from collectors in the art world where use might simply be decorative display (indistinguishable in some real sense from storage), or for book collectors who have no viable prospect of reading every book they own but potentially might read any one of them at some point. Similarly, those who collect musical recordings might see themselves as both users and collectors, without any firm distinction in their treatment of objects in the collection.

Further, the disposal stage complicates any definition of what constitutes a collector. Belk and others view the unwillingness to or lack of plan to dispose of items as key but in itself this does not logically seem to be a sharp distinguisher between collector, hoarder or slow consumer. For many material objects in our lives, there is no plan to

dispose of items, we just use them periodically until we no longer can or they no longer have value or interest for us. As many people can attest, their homes contain many items that are not in use nor thought of as particularly needing disposal, they are just ‘stuff’, a term Daniel Miller (2010) ³⁴ employs to describe the ubiquitous material of our domestic surroundings. Most folks would surely balk at being therefore defined as collectors.

Miller advances the idea that material possessions are under-valued by scholars as an index of human choice. Since material (Miller actually prefers the term ‘stuff’ which he uses synonymously) surrounds our existence, he considers such objects to be worthy of serious examination for insights on the way humans live, what we consider important, and how we express ourselves in the world. He argues that possessions represent conscious effort by individuals to create and shape themselves beyond the limits of natural form or endowment and as such, offer a window into parts of our mind that we tend to overlook.

Viewed this way then, possessions, clothes and consumption patterns render everyone a collector of some kind, and supports a view of collecting as best being considered on a continuum stretching from consumer to hoarder, covering all humankind, with most of us somewhere between the extremes, and shifting on the continuum depending on the material objects we are considering.

The empirical study of collectors

Journalistic accounts would have us believe that almost everyone is a collector of something at some point in their life, e.g. Jura Konklus³⁵, writing in the Washington Post, opens an article reporting on the various types of collectors in the world with the statement: “Just about everyone collects something”. This same statement was made almost verbatim by McKinley³⁶ who subtitled his *Psychology of Collecting* book “Everybody collects something: yes you do!” Catchiness aside, this claim is unlikely to be the case but there is evidence that collecting, of some kind or another, is a rather routine activity. Ashley Nordsletten and David Mataix-Cols (2012) ³⁷ estimate that one in three adults is a collector of some kind (compared to less than 5% who might be considered hoarders, based on psychiatric estimates). This ‘one-third of adults are collectors’ estimate has become accepted somewhat unquestioningly and repeated frequently in the literature, even on the cover of Pearce,³⁸ although empirical confirmation seems to be thin. McIntosh and Schmeichel³⁹, for example, report this proportion in their own research but source it from O’Brien (1981) who originally reported it without basis in a New York Times Magazine article⁴⁰. One has to accept that establishing firm proportions in the absence of an agreed definition of what it means to be a collector is obviously problematic, but the general claim that one-third of the adult population is a collector, as outlined above, lacks substantive confirmation and can best be considered a working assumption.

An alternative method for estimating the rate of collectors among the population is to examine the numbers for specific collecting interests. So, for example, one can find estimates for stamp collectors (apparently over 5 million in the US alone, up to 200 million globally (American Philatelic Society⁴¹) or coin collectors (estimates from 1m to 10m in the US, according to CoinWorld.com⁴²). Note, that such numbers are themselves not always based on hard data but are tied more to registered interest, trading data and self-identification through interest groups and societies, a point noted by Case (2009)⁴³ who suggests there is a meaningful distinction to be drawn between passive coin collectors (such as people who try to collect coins of every state in a casual manner) from active collectors who might join clubs, subscribe to specialist magazines and so forth. In this light, he estimates the serious type might only be 10% or so of the broader community of so-called collectors. Such distinctions among collector types based on their personal investment in collecting is summarized into three groups by Cal Lee and Ciaran Trace⁴⁴ as casual, social and serious, based on their interviews of collectors, embodying distinctions that are mirrored generally in discussions across multiple collector domains.

Whatever the precise proportions, there is general consensus that collecting cannot be considered an unusual or aberrant behavior among adults. Molly Prior (2002)⁴⁵ is frequently cited by others (see e.g., Menelaos Apostolou, 2009⁴⁶) as reporting the existence of 42 million collectors in the US, but her source seems to be the claim of a marketing firm rather than any formal data set. While putting a precise number on the proportion of collectors in the general population has proved elusive, there is sufficient financial analyses of the collectibles market to suggest that it forms a lucrative business. The NPD group, a market research and data analytics company, estimated that toys and models alone approached sales totaling \$23bn in the preceding year, with collectors estimated to have purchased 15% of these products⁴⁷. Once one adds in more expensive collectibles such as coins, stamps, books, musical instruments and artworks, one can appreciate that the commerce of collecting is indeed significant. HobbyDB, an online resource dedicated to compiling data on the collectibles market, estimates that excluding the classic car market, collectors spend upward of \$200bn annually in pursuit of their desires.⁴⁸ Clearly, whatever the precise proportion of collectors at large in the world, the behavior generates significant revenue.

There is clear evidence the collecting rate is high among children. Across the 20th century, childhood levels of collecting objects have been studied by researchers interested in human development and changing patterns behavior across the lifespan. Over studies spanning 80 years, the consistency with which children across cultures seem to collect appears remarkably stable, with up to 90% of children collecting objects of some kind during childhood, and this reaching a peak around the age 10 (see e.g., Brenda Danet and Tamar Katriel, 1988).⁴⁹ So, while the proportions are difficult to establish precisely, it seems plausible to conclude that collecting behavior is a normal and ongoing part of many people's lives.

Framing the human desire to collect

There is a rich psychoanalytic literature on collecting which, by nature of its focus tends to examine individuals for whom collecting is a disruptive or dominant component of their lives. The aim of such work is less to establish normative understandings but to shed light on the specific inner workings of a small sample of human minds. The popularity of this type of writing lies in the curiosity it excites in highlighting oddities and foibles or extreme lifestyles and habits that most of us do not exhibit.

Walter Muensterberger,⁵⁰ a psychiatrist who has made a study of collecting and collectors typifies this psychoanalytic framing. In the opening pages of his main work, *Collecting: An Unruly Passion*, he states that “observing collectors, one soon discovers an unrelenting need, even hunger, for acquisitions. This ongoing search is a core element of their personality. It is linked to far deeper roots. It turns out to be a tendency which derives from a not immediately discernible sense memory of deprivation or loss or vulnerability and a subsequent longing for substitution, closely aligned with moodiness and depressive leanings”⁵¹ From here, his book expounds on this theme through contemporary case studies and historical analysis of famous collectors, continually reinforcing the idea of such individuals seeking to overcome some childhood trauma or lack of love that shaped their later personality and drive to collect.

This view of collecting as a form of compensation is remarkably widespread and seems to have persisted throughout the popular and academic literature on collectors, even while scholars have been critical of it. Most psychoanalytical theorists characterize adult tendencies to collect as extensions of childhood experiences. In particular there are arguments that early attempts to control one’s environment (including but not exclusively such classic Freudian ideas as toilet training experiences), subjugation of needs for personal contact into desires for objects, or the sublimation of native aggressive drives to hunt and possess into a form that is socially acceptable.

It is easy to parody the unconscious analysis of human drives when postulated in terms of anal-obsessiveness, transformed aggression, or a response to childhood trauma. Indeed, E.L. Doctorow’s *Homer and Langley*,⁵² a fictional account of the infamous Collyer brothers of New York who accumulated a house of junk over the course of many years to the consternation of neighbors and the fascination of the press, mines this theme of mindless accumulation in response to familial tragedy. Langley Collyer is portrayed in the book as having a desire to pick up all manner of junk for no other justification than “instantly deciding he must have it while trusting that the reason he found it so valuable would eventually become clear to him.”⁵³ This portrayal of collecting, based on real people but presented as a work of fiction, is barely distinguishable from the case studies provided by Meunsterberger.⁵⁴

In contemporary psychoanalytic treatments of collecting that began to emerge in the later decades of the 20th century, the trauma and compensation angles are less

emphasized as scholars focus more on the situatedness of humans in a material world, and this perspective is now seen as key to understanding the motivations of collectors. Viewed through this theoretical lens, humans are thought to recognize themselves in relation to others in the world, and in the course of their psychological development, particularities of this so-called 'self-other' relationship induce feelings of stability or tension. In this framing, physical objects serve as abstractions of the 'self-other' relationship, sometimes by association and context, other times perhaps more abstractly in terms of self-worth and identity. For some people, then, collecting and engaging material objects become as natural for them as interactions and relationships are for others.⁵⁵

Though the 'self-object' lens of human drives offers a more rational and perhaps less convoluted conceptual framework than traditional Freudian perspectives, its real value seems to have been the more empirical studies this approach helped launch. Scholars in this tradition seem more interested in surveying and interviewing multiple collectors, not just extreme individuals. Ruth Formanek (1991)⁵⁶ for example, studied collectors using both questionnaire method and written responses from a general solicitation of interest in specialist magazines. Her primary goal was to establish collectors specific or self-declared motivations, and in the course of this examined her responses across basic demographic characteristics such as age, length of time collecting, as well as in terms of the emotional response individuals report when finding a new item or hearing others' reactions to their collections.

Formanek's⁵⁷ sample is quite diverse, with an everyday mix of people that seem to live relatively ordinary lives compared to those whose case studies dominate the psychoanalytic literature. Though her method mixed both questionnaire responses (112 responders) with letter writers (55 who did not complete the questionnaire), she had respondents ranging in age from 9 to over 55 (details not provided further), with the majority over 40 years old. Again, supporting the idea that collectors of both genders are the norm, her available data showed females to be the slight majority. While we cannot rule out the effect of selection bias here, her sample also included students, family members of students, faculty, dealers, and various respondents of unknown financial or professional status.

Focusing primarily on motivation, Formanek identified what she terms the major 'rubrics' of collecting:

- extension of self
- relation to others
- financial investment
- addiction/compulsion
- preservation/continuity of history⁵⁸

Several of these motivations are self-explanatory and yield interesting insights that challenge the accepted view among many who study collecting. For example, while the claim that collecting is a form of investment is commonly uttered, ⁵⁹ in Formanek's case, only 8 respondents even invoked the investment potential as a motivation for their behavior and none reported profiting from their behavior. Similarly, the common claim that collectors serve a preservation function that ensures continuity of the human record was only mentioned by a handful of respondents. The data thus suggesting that at least two of the regularly claimed justifications for collecting may reflect social desirability projections and acceptable excuses for collecting rather than genuine motivations.

More interesting for those seeking to understand collectors are the remaining categories that Formanek⁶⁰ identified, in particular the 'extension of self' and 'relation to others' categories. Here, she draws a firm distinction between motivations related to self-identity and those related to one's relationship to others. Within the self category she suggests three main drivers to collecting: as a defense against negative emotions, as a desire for control, and as a provider of self-esteem. One can certainly envisage these as related, with the development of expertise in a collection area supporting a more positive self-image, and thereby a commensurate counter to negative emotions. She quotes a collector as describing the process as 'creative' and bringing a 'purpose to life', which lends credence to the general idea of collectors finding deep personal value in the acquisition and curation of their collections.

In terms of relations to others, Formanek's⁶¹ data provides a more complicated picture. Though she describes the theme in benign or positive terms as the sharing of joy with others and building connections among like-minded enthusiasts, some of the responses of her participants seem to suggest a somewhat darker aspect, e.g., one respondent states collecting is part of 'the desire to belong and become part of an acceptable group' (p. 282). While it is easy to read too much into the responses of individuals, it does seem that the 'others' rubric contains at least some aspects of people's drives that are also important and related to self too, particularly the desire to be accepted by the group.

While Formanek does not draw attention to it in her paper, her reporting allows us to see the weightings of responses in each category. So, for example, the largest number of respondents spoke to the 'extensions of self' theme (30 in all) while only nine spoke of the addiction/compulsion theme, again throwing into relief the distinction between her data and descriptions that tend to dominate much of the literature, popular and psychoanalytic, on collectors. Similarly, only 8 respondents discussed financial motivators for collecting, the same number for the 'relation to others' category, and only four respondents, as mentioned, invoked a desire to preserve items for future generations as their primary motivation. It should be noted here that for many collectors (though Formanek's paper does not allow us to calculate exact numbers), more than one motivation applied.

The strong conclusion of identity as the primary subconscious driver of collector behavior that is derived from Formanek's findings has provided stimulus to other researchers drawn to the study of collectors. Helga Dittmar (1992),⁶² citing Formanek's work, adopts a social psychological approach to collecting behavior by treating material consumption in contemporary society as a means of acquiring and expressing identity. She opens her account by acknowledging that the belief in possessions enabling a form of identity construction is now so taken for granted by scholars of cultural anthropology that few researchers even question it. She particularly criticizes interpretative arguments that collecting is an innate characteristic of humans, stating:

“the existence of physiological, genetic or neurological mechanisms which underlie possessive behavior is assumed rather than being acknowledged as being in need of supporting evidence. Such evidence is not available”⁶³ (Dittmar, p. 36-37).

Dittmar's⁶⁴ own analysis largely derives from empirical work on consumer behavior and studies of people's preferences for possessions using survey methods. Her synthesis of the available data suggests that a major variable at work in decisions to acquire or possess objects is the image an object presents to its potential owner, and the alignment of this image with an owner's personal sense of aspirational self. Image construction, in these terms, relates object possession to self in a way that helps create a form of symbolic self-completion through which individuals come to see themselves more positively. According to Dittmar,⁶⁵ this process cannot be completed in isolation, and a major component in her analysis is the mediation role played by social groups, and one's desire for membership within them. She invokes research findings on brands, consumer identification, and social reference groups to support this approach, and thus offers a view of collecting as a means of social location (the placement of self within a network of groups in society).

Though Dittmar⁶⁶ did not directly set out to answer the question of why people collect, or why some people are more serious collectors than others, her data does explore differences in motivations for people and therefore gives us particular insights into such concerns. For example, by surveying people in the UK on their most valued possessions, and then categorizing the results into types using correspondence analysis on two main axes (self v. other, and functional v. symbolic) she concluded that males are more likely to acquire or seek possessions that reflect utilitarian or entertainment interests, while females prefer possessions that reflect relationships and social ties. She acknowledges these distinctions may be a product of cultural biases and opportunities for collecting that may shift over time, but nevertheless, her research offers one of the clearest empirical examples yet of the material objects people consider worthy of retaining for themselves through their lifetimes (which we might consider a form of natural collecting) and how gender might be a factor in people's views of import.

In a further analysis, Dittmar⁶⁷ also compared respondents across socio-economic levels (operationalized as employment level and status), in part because of the often-assumed status of collecting as a rich person's indulgence. Perhaps surprisingly, she reported that the differences between these groups were slight, with both poorer and wealthier groups sharing similar motivations and values for their preferred possessions. Economic factors however did play a role, with those from the wealthier end of the spectrum displaying a greater preference for symbolic items than less wealthy individuals who emphasized more utilitarian possessions. In an interesting research manipulation, she asked people to list both their preferred possessions and those they imagined a 'typical' business person, student, or unemployed person would value (in each case, an 'other' group to the respondents). While there was some disagreement between what a member of each category actually possessed and the expectations others held of the group, there was remarkable consistency across groups e.g., both unemployed and business people shared very similar responses of what they believed students would prefer for possessions.

So, over the latter years of the 20th Century we can see two distinct strands of work in the study of individual collectors, marking a shift from the dominant psychoanalytic considerations of special case collectors responding to unresolved conflicts or traumas in childhood, toward a more rational and empirically-grounded approach based on surveys, interviews and comparative analyses of everyday people's values for objects and possessions. This evolution has yielded a basic theory of collecting that considers the act routine, grounded in personal means and memories, whereby the process allows and enriches one's personal sense of identity in the world. This trend toward more empirical examinations of collecting has continued with the emergence of our digital information structure, which itself has pushed research in a new direction. In the last twenty years, the collecting of non-material objects, or the emergence of digital collectibles, has brought fresh impetus to the study of collecting experiences in everyday life.

The shift to digital collectibles

While the literature on collecting is obviously dominated by the consideration of material objects, an emerging area of scholarship seeks to understand how digital objects might form the basis of collections and explores if, in so doing, there is a significant difference in human collecting behavior in the digital realm. This work has origins in studies of personal information management that were conducted in the 1990s as information storage and retrieval came to impact routine office work and later, domestic information management (see e.g., Deborah Barreau, 1995)⁶⁸. It should be recognized that much of this work on digital collections dealt with managing information overload and clutter, rather than on any direct study of collectors. Contemporary scholars on what has become known as digital collectibles tend to make a firm distinction between

archival concerns and the more specific focus on collectible digital possessions (see for example, Amber Cushing, (2013)⁶⁹, or Rebecca Watkins, Abigail Sellen and Sian Lindley, (2015).⁷⁰

At first glance, one might imagine that both the absence of materiality, and the ability for a digital collection to be reproduced cheaply or lost almost instantaneously, would negate or reduce the desirability of digital collectibles, but this does not appear to be the case. William Odom et al (2011)⁷¹, for example, examined teenagers' views of digital possessions such as music and photographs, and reported that some respondents almost obsessively backed up their possessions for fear of losing them, indicating a high level of value placed in such objects. In the age of high-resolution music streaming and downloading services such as HDtracks, some music collectors pay a premium for recordings that are purchased in file format over the internet, confirming that digital possessions can have value very much like material objects for owners.

Beyond the economic value, Connie Golsteijn, Elise van den Hoven, David Frohlich, and Abigail Sellen (2012)⁷² have shown that although people tend to value physical objects above digital ones, digital objects do have the potential to be cherished highly also. In their study, they asked nine people to consider objects they cherished in their own homes and examined why people felt these possessions were important. Although there were subtle differences between formats, the role of self-identity in establishing importance for people seemed key to both physical and digital possessions

Cushing⁷³ interviewed 23 people about how they viewed digital possessions, which for her study not only included items we might routinely consider 'objects' such as photographs and text files, but also items such as Facebook accounts and software code. Her results suggest that digital possessions serve very similar purposes to material ones in terms of representing self-identity, offering personal value, and enabling a sense of control over the world. Further, her work showed that some people do place monetary value on digital possessions such as e-books and music collections, much as they do material collections, confirming earlier work by Mark Fox⁷⁴ and Maria Styven ⁷⁵ (2010) and subsequently supported in experimental tests by Ozgun Atasoy and Carey Morewedge (2017)⁷⁶ that revealed lower but nonetheless measurable economic value in digital objects.

Jane Gruning and Sian Lindley (2016)⁷⁷ interviewed occupants of households to identify how they conceived ownership and possession of both physical and digital objects. Though less concerned with the question of why objects are collected, they specifically examined how members of the household viewed ownership, with a particular focus on the distinctions between physical and digital objects. Their respondents reveal that digital objects are shared much like physical possessions, based on trust and with a sense that, much as with material possessions, the act of sharing digital possessions helps create and shape the identity of a household.

Extending this beyond identity, the concept of control that is so established in the regular literature on collectors also remains extant in the digital realm. Cushing⁷⁸ notes that the digital realm introduces a challenge between possession and ownership for digital objects that rarely exists for material objects, suggesting the term ‘bounded control’ might more appropriately apply here. Though highlighting a change that digital collectibles introduces to our framing of human collecting, this qualification also reveals similarities across realms, and suggests the fundamental human processes involved in collecting transcend the material and digital realms. We identify with and seek control in the digital collectible world much like the physical world.

The emergence of digital collectibles leverages the opportunities enabled by the internet to enhance the search and ease the acquisition phases, and there is now a considerable infrastructure of communities and forums for sharing information and locating or selling items that considerably extend the reach of collectors from the pre-digital infrastructure. As recognized in Watkins, Sellen and Lindley (2015)⁷⁹ the parallels between digital and material collecting are obvious. In their view, based on deep interviews with collectors in the UK, the emergence of digital collectibles does not create a new, distinctive type of collecting process but raises the challenge of developing of more appropriate and useful technologies for supporting the full process of collecting, from acquisition to control and display.

While the study of digital possessions and collecting is still an emerging area, it is worth noting that much of this newer focus on the study of collecting employs empirical methods and tends to report findings in scholarly conferences and journals rather than the monographic reporting that was typical of earlier work. Theoretically, digital collections research tends to fit well within the recently established theory of personal collections, invoking similar constructs to explain collecting as the representation and reinforcement of identity. This interpretation is echoed in Belk’s⁸⁰ update of his earlier model of collecting behavior in the material realms to address the technological shifts of the digital age. While he identifies several areas related to dematerialization and the potential creation of multiple identities through digital avatars as distinctively enabled in the new information world, he concludes that in the context of collecting and owning, his original concept of the extended self as a driver for collecting ‘is alive and well in the digital world’⁸¹

In sum, it would appear that digital collecting is not, as might seem at first blush, a departure from human activity in the material realm, but a natural occurrence of established human behavior now enabled in an emerging information infrastructure. Theoretically, we see a convergence on the drivers of human behavior and the purpose collections serve in our lives. To this end, the final section attempts to draw the literature together into a synthesis that can serve as a guide for interpreting the literature and framing further enquiries.

A unified view of the collecting process

The history of studies on individual collecting reveal a complicated and often idiosyncratic set of motivations driving behavior in this realm. Further, there is no single literature or even discipline that serves as the intellectual home for scholarly work on the human act of collecting. Instead, we can read psychiatrists, clinicians, historians, archivists, anthropologists, information scientists, social psychologists and economists offering perspectives and (to a lesser extent) data, while representative interests from marketing, manufacturers, and auction houses also contribute to the mix. Making sense of this plurality of views represents a challenge to any researcher, but by considering collecting as a process (rather than a condition) with common stages of activity and decision making it is possible to synthesize these multiple perspectives more cohesively.

McIntosh and Schmeichel⁸² suggested there exist 8 steps in the collecting process, though it should be noted they provide no evidence nor do they describe any principled basis for this outline. However, it is a dominant model in the literature and encapsulates a view that has been well-cited. The steps are presented with short explanations in parentheses below.

1. Goal Formation (deciding to collect something)
2. Gathering Information (becoming knowledgeable about objects)
3. Planning and Courtship (determining where to search and attaching to a target)
4. The Hunt (to find and purchase the target)
5. Acquisition (attainment resulting in positive affect)
6. Post-acquisition (validation of self through identification with object)
7. Manipulation/display/cataloging (possession rituals based on control of objects)
8. Return to [1] goal formation or planning and courtship [3] (further collecting begins again).

This process should be treated more as suggestive than empirically verified, and upon close examination there seem to be some obvious shortcomings. The stages are somewhat finely sliced and perhaps not unambiguously distinctive as presented. For example, step 1, deciding to collect, is likely a less frequently occurring step for routine collectors who presumably make the decision to do so and then proceed to collect objects without revisiting that stage. Belk⁸³ for example offers data that there is rarely a formal commitment made to being a collector, invoking similar work from Susanna Johnson and Time Beddow (1986)⁸⁴ to support the argument that initial commitments are somewhat incidental rather than deliberative.

Further, McIntosh and Schmeichel's⁸⁵ model allows for some branching of sequence by suggesting that collectors iterate from steps 3 to 8 routinely. If so, then it leaves step 2 in a somewhat superfluous state of being invoked only after step 1 occurs, when an original decision to collect is made. This seems somewhat implausible in light of

studies indicating the gathering information to be a continual and ongoing process reported by many collectors as key to their joy in the process (see e.g, Muensterberger's case study of 'Martin G')⁸⁶ and is tied to the commonly expressed value of developing expertise in the specialized area of one's collection. So, on balance, this process model is more suggestive than fixed.

Without direct data on their process as manifest in the lives of collectors over time, we are forced to rely on a mix of logical reasoning, close reading of the literature and face validity to synthesize a stage model of the collection process at the individual level. In the interest of parsimony, we might simplify the McIntosh and Schmeichel eight stages model to reflect the newer literature and research findings to yield the following plausible four-stage model of collecting:

1. Knowledge development.

Through interest or just desire to avoid costly mistakes, collectors seem to be discerning in their understanding of the objects they seek. Repeated comments from collectors studied by scholars cited in this review echo the sentiment of being fascinated by certain objects, their origins, differences, and associated qualities that render them personally desirable. For many collectors, the immersion involved in study or discussion with others about the objects is seen as a major motivation.

2. Target framing

While ongoing knowledge development provides the background for the connoisseurship of collectors, there comes a time when additions to the collection are identified. This seems to involve a qualitative shift that narrows the collector's focus from general knowledge to the specific estimation of one's commitment to acquiring, the costs one is willing to bear, and the context in which one will engage with the seller or selling entity (through a dealer, in person, online, via auction or fixed price sale etc).

3. Acquisition

The commitment to act when obtaining items for a collection can increase arousal in many collectors as they negotiate, seal the transaction and acquire the item for themselves. While this is the moment a desired item becomes a possession, it might actually be the quickest stage in a long process of prior knowledge development and target framing. This stage also is the source of the data used to calculate value in the market.

4. Controlling

Once acquired, items now become manipulable and controlled by the collector. Here the various processes of cataloging, displaying, or manipulating (as McIntosh and Schmeichel⁸⁷ term it) come to the fore. Control can also mean storing or selling, this is

the choice of the collector as items in one's collection are no longer objects to be desired or sought but have entered one's personal realm of ownership.

While it seems certain that a serious collector always engages in the stage of knowledge development, stages two and three might only occur periodically, with some targets being purchased by others before a commitment in stage three is made, or the move to purchase not being fully consummated as the collector learns more, has doubts or finds other demands take precedence. Further, it is likely that there is considerable feedback within stages. For example, the identification of acquisitions (stage two) is likely closely intertwined with knowledge development (stage one), where collectors gain more insights into the specific target and seek reassurances that the item is the one they really want, is priced appropriately, is singular or one of a set etc. In this light, we can think of the stages in the collecting process less as pre-determined, but occurring with varying foci of attention and durations, across a series of mutually intertwined and iterative phases, all situated within the realities of a collector's life world. I have attempted to summarize this representation in Table 1.

<i>Stage</i>	Knowledge	Framing	Acquisition	Control
<i>Focus</i>	Expertise and connoisseurship Monitoring	Targeting	Timing, pricing	Ownership, Display, Sharing, Manipulation
<i>Impact</i>	Self image, Group status	Affective	Economic, Affective	Identity management
<i>Time</i>	Ongoing and evolving	Periodic	Periodic	Ongoing

Table 1. Collecting as a four-stage process through the lens of focus, impact and time

Framed in this more conservative estimate of stages, the process of collecting seems less sensational or idiosyncratic than might be imagined from either psychoanalytic or journalistic accounts. Further, basing the process more on empirical and data-driven accounts of collecting, we can envisage each stage as reflecting particular disciplinary lenses on aspects of this human process. The knowledge development and target framing stages are where studies of the role of online forums, specialist literature, websites, and expert consultations are key. This is a stage where information studies might have particular interests. The acquisition stage opens up opportunities for the more

economic analysis of collecting and the market for specialized goods, while the controlling stage seems particularly rich for more psychoanalytic approaches to human behavior. This perhaps explains some of the complexity in the literature on collecting as few scholars have studied across the stages and disciplinary focus tends to narrow attention to key areas within the process. Considered as a staged activity that repeats at variable rates according to individual lived experience, collecting is neither strange nor necessary, but part of an extended act of engagement with the world that many people perform across their lifecycle to varying degrees, sometimes partially, sometime completely.

Conclusion

The literature on collecting has a rich history, within which the study of individual rather than institutional collectors is a growing subset. While attention has focused mostly on extreme collectors with the means or the peculiar obsession to acquire objects, more recent scholarship has treated collecting as a common human endeavor that ranges from casual hobby to significant business. In this review I've presented collecting as existing somewhere on a continuum of human engagement with objects that ranges from consumption through hoarding, depending on context, rendering us all collectors of some kind with relatively few people at either extreme. Collecting is thus normal but varied, perhaps best epitomized by considering items of wear in one's wardrobe as a collection that is a mix of the disposable and the long-term, with most clothes having a finite but multi-use existence in our lives. But unlike clothing, which everyone needs, the collections world manifests desire for objects that are often unique and sought only by very few, and rarely ever are items that a collector needs for practical purposes;

The dominant early literature on collector motivations relies on psychoanalytic treatments of childhood trauma or depravation being sublimated into collecting drives. While the lives of famous collectors can be treated this way, there is little evidence that such motivations underpin most routine collecting behavior of adults. More recent psychoanalytic work points to the role of collections in enhancing one's sense of control and knowledge of the world, without requiring further explanation via deep psychodynamic constructs.

Over the last three decades, there has been a marked increase in empirical studies of collectors among the general public, which points to a recognition of the role of material possessions in identity creation and presentation. There is increased evidence that collectors tend to gain pleasure from the chase, like to share their enthusiasm with others, and view their collections as marking their membership of groups, acts which are enabled by the increased connectivity of our growing information infrastructure. This work is also suggestive of possible differences in values among groups in a culture and might help us explain the market for collectibles while shedding light on factors that lead to shared or different views on our world.

The emergence of digital collectibles introduces contemporary questions related to identity and control in the digital realm but seems to be logically accommodated within an established model of collecting. There is a need for better design of technology to support the full range of collector behaviors but what seems clear is that the growth of the Internet of Things and a move toward streamed and shared goods has not lessened the routine human practice of collecting. We are likely now witnessing the emergence of a routine human behavior in a new context.

Notes

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