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Exploring Consumer Collecting Behavior: A Conceptual Model and Research Agenda

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Exploring consumer collecting behavior: a conceptual model and research agenda

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Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to explore the behaviors that revolve around collecting, the motivations behind these behaviors and the psychological benefits collectors receive from engaging in these collecting behaviors.

Design/methodology/approach

A thorough literature review and integration of prominent psychological and social psychology theories are used to propose a conceptual model, several research propositions and potential research questions for future scholarship.

Findings

This paper proposes that a collector salient identity and collecting motives drive tension-inducing social and solitary collecting behaviors and that these behaviors in turn reinforce the collector salient identity. Relevant aspects of the collecting phenomenon are explored, and included propositions provide future research direction to validate a proposed conceptual model designed to provide insights into a common consumer behavior.

Originality/value

This paper provides a broad conceptual model and explores several details of consumer collecting behavior as a basis for future research.

Keywords

Self-identity, Paradox, Identity salience, Collecting, Consumer behaviour, Mortality salience

"Collecting is more than just buying objects." – Eli Broad

Introduction

The Milwaukee Art Museum recently featured an exhibition, "Milwaukee Collects," of artwork on loan from the private collections of local citizens (Tanzilo, 2017). This exhibition featured a variety of pieces from collectors who "very carefully considered and built their collections based on their personal interests and unique artistic eye" (Polednik, 2017), and the exhibition was unique in that there were contributions from collectors from diverse backgrounds, not just contributions from large, influential patrons as is common. Attending this exhibition revealed several interesting details to this author. One, the art and furniture, and other curios collected seemed to attest to the varying perspectives of what constitutes a collection; each collection featured items that were related in some way, be it period, aesthetics, theme or other congruency, and each item was selected to convey a specific meaning. Two, the apparent motivation behind the pieces collected varied significantly. Whereas some collectors had the resources to create impressive collections worthy of their own legacy exhibits, other collectors appeared to use their collections to solely communicate their unique tastes and interests. And three, irrespective of their motivation behind or their perspective on collecting, these individuals embraced a collector identity and literally put it on display.

The purpose of this research is to investigate collecting behaviors, the characteristics of collectors that engage in them and to provide a framework for future research. First, a literature review explores what constitutes a collection and how collectors collect. Next, a conceptual model and a series of research propositions rooted in psychological and social psychological theories are presented. Finally, practical implications are discussed and a program for future research is proposed through several research questions.

Defining a collection

It has been estimated that 40 per cent of US households engage in some form of collecting activity (Danzinger, 2002). These collections would likely constitute as broad a variety of collectibles as perspectives on collecting. To better understand the necessary traits of collections and how collections typically begin, an exploration of extant literature is undertaken.

The literature provides several definitions that are useful to establish what constitutes collecting and the collector. Collecting has been defined as the "process of actively, selectively, and passionately acquiring and possessing things removed from ordinary use and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences" (Belk, 1995b, p. 67). Collecting is an activity undertaken by a collector, an individual

> *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 (McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004, p. 86).*

From these definitions, a pattern emerges. First, what is collected can vary beyond tangible objects, and second, regardless of what is collected, a collection has several necessary traits.

What can be collected

Physical objects are the most cited form of collectible in the literature and the one that most often springs to mind. This is perhaps because collecting is an acquisitive activity and the purchase of items for a collection is a fundamental part of many collectors' experience. But what is collected is substantially broader than tangible objects. Collections can also comprise experiences, ideas and beings. Someone who travels extensively for pleasure can be said to collect experiences (Belk *et al.*, 1988), a person who collects "jokes, proverbs, and tall tales" (Danet and Katriel, 1986, p. 258) is a collector of ideas, and animate objects such as animals (e.g. a zoo) or plants (e.g. bonsai) constitute collecting beings (Danet and Katriel, 1986). And while some researchers might include persons in this definition of beings (e.g. the wives of Henry VIII or the husbands of Zsa Zsa Gabor) (Belk *et al.*, 1991), others disagree (Holbrook, 1993).

Necessary traits

The literature exposes several traits necessary for the existence of a collection. One, the objects, ideas, experiences or beings in the collection form an interrelated set. Two, the objects collected are the product of a highly selective process. Three, the objects collected are removed from their profane, utilitarian role and made sacred. Each of these traits is discussed in detail below.

Interrelated set

The items in a collection must be, in some form or another, related. In other words, there must be a motif that ties the collection together (Danet and Katriel, 1986). This relationship may be items that are serialized (e.g. a year's issue of baseball cards), aesthetically similar (e.g. antique glass in the same color), thematically similar (e.g. Coca-Cola memorabilia) or practically speaking, any similarity that a collector might be able to build a set of significant possessions upon. But it is not merely to possess an interrelated set that appeals to a collector, rather they become the controller of a "little world" (Belk, 1995b, p. 70).

These little worlds have the ability to both create and release tension for the collector (Carey, 2008; Danet and Katriel, 1986; McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004). Establishing a goal for the collection creates tension (i.e. an expectation to achieve the goal), while the acquisition of a new item releases tension. Marketers creatively exploit the tension of set completion by exhorting consumers to "Collect all five!" (Carey, 2008, p. 345).

Note that nowhere in the previous discussion is there any requirement for items in a collection to be possessed simultaneously. If a collector had owned every model of Chevrolet Corvette since its introduction in 1953, but sold each to purchase the next, it would still be considered a collection, albeit sequential (Holbrook, 1993).

Selectivity

Selectivity helps differentiate collecting from accumulation. Without systematic discrimination of objects to create a collection, objects merely form an accumulation that:

> *"lack unity and defy categorization" (Belk et al., 1991). Thus, selectivity is a necessary trait of the collection because it helps define the interrelatedness of the collected set. In addition, selectivity provides another mechanism by which flow may be attained when the collector postpones the fear of completion of the interrelated set by upgrading the items in the collection (Belk et al., 1988).*

Non-utilitarian and sacred

When items are added to a collection:

> *They are wretched out of their own true contexts and become dead to their living time and space in order that they may be given an immortality within the collection (Pearce, 1995, p. 24).*

In other words, those items collected cease to be the utilitarian objects valued solely for their inherent usefulness, and they take on additional significance as part of an interrelated set. This additional significance is often referred to in the literature as *sacredness* (Belk *et al.*, 1988; Hughes and Hogg, 2006; Long and Schiffman, 1997). For many collectors, this sense of sacredness is reinforced by the place of honor a collection often occupies and its ritualized handling.

How collectors collect

The concept of paradox was prominent throughout the collecting behavior literature (Belk *et al.*, 1988; Carey, 2008; Danet and Katriel, 1986; Long and Schiffman, 1997). Some paradoxical aspects such as the rational/irrational nature of collecting were well covered, while others received less attention. A specific paradox not directly addressed in the literature is the social/solitary nature of collecting, which will be expounded upon later. Tension creation and dissipation were also reoccurring topics and were closely associated with the paradoxical nature of collecting (Carey, 2008; Danet and Katriel, 1986; Hughes and Hogg, 2006; Long and Schiffman, 1997; McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004; Rubel and Rosman, 2001).

Paradoxical nature

Materialist/anti-materialist

Materialism is defined as the "importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions" and "at the highest levels, such possessions assume a central place in a person's life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in life" (Belk, 1984, p. 291). On the surface, collecting would seem to be the height of materialism, and it has, in fact, been described as a "form of materialistic luxury consumption *par excellence*" (Belk, 1995a, p. 479) Collectors, after all, readily acquire possessions for their amusement or edification alone. Additionally, individuals who were "nongenerous, envious, and possessive" – what Belk (1985, p. 272) defines as subtraits of materialism – were "most likely to have positive responses about collecting".

But collecting is also paradoxically anti-materialistic. Collectors can be seen as heroes of consumption because they defy consumption (Eisenberg, 1987). They remove objects from their "associations with the marketplace and monetary value" (Belk, 1998, p. 8) and "often see themselves as heroic saviors of objects that, in their view, others fail to appreciate adequately" (Belk, 1998, p. 12). In this view, collections are the outcome of romance and passion, not merely the accretion of things. "Collectors 'fall in love with' objects, cannot resist buying them when they see them, go to great lengths to hunt for them, devotedly care for them, wax rhapsodic when talking about them, and so forth" (Danet and Katriel, 1994). Collecting differs from other forms of consumption in that the collector engages in the behavior with a passionate zeal (Belk, 1995a). This may explain the disdain that "serious" collectors feel for those who claim to collect merely for investment: these "acquisitive" collectors have no *spiritual* connection to their collections. In fact, given the earlier definition of collecting, the accumulation of valuable objects for investment purposes alone is not collecting: "The passionate possessiveness of collecting differentiates it from ordinary consumption and from consumer acquisitions where investment is the primary motivation (in which case the objects of investment matter little)" (Belk, 1995a, p. 479).

Social/solitary

The literature outlines a number of collecting behaviors that are common within the collecting experience. While the author did not find any categorization for these behaviors within the literature, a careful review determined that collecting behaviors generally fit within two broad contexts: social behaviors and solitary behaviors.

Social behaviors of the collector include hunting, networking, sharing and consulting. Collectors often exhibit a hunting behavior as they stalk the next item for their collection, and they must contend with competing "hunters" for their prize (Formanek, 1994; Long and Schiffman, 1997). In addition, the hunting activity may be collaborative as well as competitive as when collectors form social networks (Long and Schiffman, 1997). These networks may include collecting clubs or close relationships with fellow "hunters" where collecting knowledge is exchanged.

Sharing and consulting are additional forms of social behaviors that are related. Because collecting is "generally a socially approved activity" (Belk, 1995a, p. 480), sharing among collectors – defined as allowing others to view and admire the collection – is a common collector behavior. Consulting constitutes an alternate form of sharing, but instead of an actual collection being shared, the collector shares knowledge and expertise. Sharing and consulting serve a "legitimizing function" which validates the collector's items as being worthy of collecting (Hughes and Hogg, 2006, p. 125) and to expand self-esteem through acquisition of "expert status" (McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004).

Solitary behaviors include researching, cataloging, displaying and admiring. Researching behavior includes gathering of information (building expertise), planning (developing a hunting plan of action) and courtship (forming an attachment with the desired object) (McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004). Cataloging includes the solitary and "detailed process of organizing and codifying" (Hughes and Hogg, 2006, p. 125) the collection. With the exception of personal collections that are displayed in public museums, the vast majority of collections exist within personal environments for the primary benefit of the collector. Thus, the displaying of collections is primarily a solitary behavior. Finally, admiring is an experiential form of consumption for the collector that "focuses on the symbolic, hedonic, and esthetic nature of consumption" (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982, p. 132) while directing the collector toward "fantasies, feelings, and fun" of the experience of consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982).

Rational/irrational

Collectors often exhibit both rational and irrational behaviors. They weigh a number of variables to make critical decisions about what objects should enter their collections (Long and Schiffman, 1997). How else but rational can one describe the methodical completion of interrelated sets through the weighing of price against issues of quality and rarity?

At the same time, a collector's passion may override rational concerns. Price may become no barrier, dreams of the collectible may dominate thoughts, and the irresistible and insatiable urge of collecting may alienate the collector from family members (Baekeland, 1981; Gelber, 1992; Long and Schiffman, 1997). From a solely financial investment perspective, collecting is often not rational as collectibles tend to perform less favorably than traditional investments (Frey and Eichenberger, 1995).

What is collected also highlights the rational and irrational nature of collecting. While high-ticket items like antique cars or wristwatches may be rational because of their innate and long-term monetary value, "how does one rationally explain the collecting of matchbook covers, Crackerjack toys, belt buckles, salt cellars, Aunt Jemima, etc.?" (Carey, 2008, p. 336).

Other tensions

Tensions, specifically those related to items in the collection and the collection itself, were most often mentioned in the literature. Danet and Katriel (1994, p. 264) point out that "collectors intentionally create an agenda for the production of, and reduction of, manageable tension." This tension connects the two primary themes of collecting: pursuit of the collectible and closure of the collection (Carey, 2008; Danet and Katriel, 1986; Long and Schiffman, 1997). Thus:

> *Collector is like a tension machine, providing both the means for building tension (seeking another object for the collection) and the method to reduce this tension (adding another object to the collection) (Long and Schiffman, 1997, p. 506).*

This tension even includes the disposition of the collection when the collector nears death. At this point the collector must balance the tension between "holding onto special objects and controlling their future biographies" (Price *et al.*, 2000, p. 184).

One might try to draw a parallel between the desire for an object and its acquisition as a form of need-satisfaction process. This might be true to a degree – the collector feels a short-term sense of satisfaction in the acquisition – but in a larger sense, this would be misguided. Ask any collector whether they are satisfied with the state of their collection and you would likely hear about the next planned acquisition. In fact, though collectors desire to complete a collection, they often postpone its completion by seeking the same objects of higher quality (e.g. higher graded baseball card) or redefining the collection itself (e.g. American League *and* National League baseball cards). This desire to keep the collection going through postponement of its completion can be tied to the collector's identity. As Belk *et al.* (1988, p. 551) note: "If one is a collector and there is nothing left to collect, who is one then?".

Theoretical background and research propositions

Whether a collector should be categorized as "good" or "bad," overlooks a more fundamental point: an individual's identity as a collector coexists alongside many other social and solitary identities. As Stryker (2002, p. 60) states, "one may have a long list of identities, limited only by the number of structured role relationships one is involved in." In other words, one is never just a collector, he or she may also simultaneously be a scholar, parent, leader, volunteer…and each of these identities may bring its own motivations to the collecting activity. A historian may collect because they are interested in studying and preserving the past, a parent might collect mementos of their child to preserve personal histories, and a child might collect to help discover new worlds and revel in their complexity.

In this section, some relevant theories that help explain collecting behaviors are examined and then these are tied to the motivations that may explicate these behaviors.

Identity and social identity theories

Buying behaviors, such as collecting, are closely intertwined with perceptions of identity (Langner *et al.*, 2013). As consumers engage in collecting activities, their self-identity and social identities are dynamically constructed. Identity and social identity theories are examined for their ability to explain how collectors construct and maintain these relevant identities.

Identity theory, which has its roots in sociology, proposes that individuals are made up of discrete identities and that these identities exist within a hierarchy of salience that guide behavioral outcomes (Stets and Burke, 2000; Stryker, 1968, 2002; Stryker and Burke, 2000). For example, an individual in a given situation whose parental identity is most salient can be expected to behave in ways consistent with a parental role.

In contrast, social identity theory, which has its roots in psychology, concerns social groups and their interrelations (Hogg *et al.*, 1995; Stets and Burke, 2000). These social groups are sets of "individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves as members of the same social category" (Stets and Burke, 2000, p. 225). Salience within social identity theory concerns "the activation of an identity in a situation" in which the identity endeavors to increase its influence upon the group (Stets and Burke, 2000, p. 229).

These theories are obviously different. Hogg *et al.* (1995) note that these theories "occupy parallel but separate universes, with virtually no cross-referencing" and that while:

> *Identity theory may be more effective in dealing with chronic identities and with interpersonal social interaction…social identity theory may be more useful in exploring intergroup dimensions and in specifying the socio cognitive generative details of identity dynamics (1995, p. 255).*

Stets and Burke (2000, p. 234), however, found that the differences between these theories:

> *Originated in a view of the group as the basis for identity (who one is) held by social identity theory and in a view of the role as a basis for identity (what one does) held by identity theory.*

Further, Stets and Burke found that "being [who one is] and doing [what one does] are both central features of one's identity." Regardless of whether one decides to view these two theories as fundamentally the same or different, both theories provide explanatory power for both social and solitary behaviors, the same behaviors that have relevance to collecting.

In the proposed model, the collector salient identity does not prescribe a specific theory-based salient identity. At any specific time, this collector salient identity may be a member of any number of social groups (e.g. collecting club, online social network) or play one of many collector roles (e.g. historian, investor).

Kleine *et al.* (1993) explain that "the prominence of an identity in a person's self-structure influences the frequency with which its related, self-fulfilling behaviors are enacted." In other words, the strength of a collector salient identity to an individual will determine how often collecting behaviors are initiated. Thus:

P1. The collector salient identity drives collecting behaviors.

Self-determination theory concerns the motivation behind the choices individuals make without external influence (Ryan, 1993; Ryan and Deci, 2003). Its effects are constructive in that an individual's goals, values and behaviors become central to one's self-concept. Ryan and Deci (2003) propose three psychological needs that are necessary to motivate the self to initiate specific behaviors. These three are *autonomy*, feelings of control and agency over one's decisions; *competence*, feelings of effectiveness and control over personal outcomes; and *relatedness*, feelings of connectedness with others. Of these, autonomy and competence are the basis for intrinsic motivation (i.e. willingness to engage in activities that are interesting and fulfilling in their own right).

Previous research has shown that "stronger identity formation leads to increased perceptions of autonomy and competence, and feelings of competence then foster intrinsic motivation" (Faye and Sharpe, 2008, p. 195). Therefore, through the development of autonomy and competence a collector salient identity drives collecting motivations (Figure 1). Thus:

P2. Collector salient identity drives collecting motives.

Collecting motives

The identity of the collector and the motives behind collecting are closely tied. Formanek (1994) collected responses from a variety of collectors to establish a taxonomy of collecting motives and found that most collecting motives fall into five broad categories. One, self-relevance: those who collect as a defense against negative affect, as a personal challenge, and to maintain self-esteem. Two, social relevance: those who collect to maintain social ties with other collectors. Three, historical preservation and continuity: those who collect to maintain a sense of past into the future. Four, financial investment: those who seek financial benefits through their collecting. Five, addiction: those that are compelled to collect because they have become addicted to the feelings of desire or excitement of discovery and possession.

Pearce (1993) offers a diverse list of motivations for collecting:

> *Leisure, aesthetics, competition, risk, fantasy, a sense of community, prestige, domination, sensual gratification, sexual foreplay, desire to reframe objects, the pleasing rhythm of sameness and difference, ambition to achieve perfection, extending the self, reaffirming the body, producing gender identity, and achieving immortality (cited in McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004).*

Other motivations found in the literature include envy (Subkowski, 2006), psychological security (Belk, 1995a; Muensterberger, 1994), financial security (Belk *et al.*, 1991), legitimization (Belk *et al.*, 1991), play (Danet and Katriel, 1994) and power (Belk, 1998).

Unfortunately, consumer research to date has not explored collecting motives in a focused, theory-driven manner. For instance, few studies have explored the impact of dispositional variables and the role they serve as drivers of collecting behaviors. Below, a number of dispositional variables are introduced and their potential to serve as motivators of collecting behavior are explored.

Mortality salience

Terror management theory maintains that mankind's highly evolved cognitive abilities have uniquely gifted us with the capacity for self-reflective thought and that these thoughts in turn have shouldered humans with the burdensome realization of the awareness and inevitability of our own death (i.e. mortality salience) (Greenberg *et al.*, 1986). To defend against the potential terror this realization can provoke, individuals compensate by "creating culture and putting faith in cultural worldviews" (Arndt *et al.*, 2004). These cultures and worldviews increase self-esteem and "may reduce death-related anxiety by offering the hope of immortality, either symbolically or literally, to those who engage in culturally valued activity" (McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004). Belk (1988) provides additional theoretical footing for this idea through his theory of extended self, postulating that consumers use possessions as a quest for immortality. Mortality salience also likely plays a role in the disposition of collections when collectors must face the fact that they will not be able to take care of the collection indefinitely and the choice of bequeathing the collection – rather than liquidating it – provides some control over the "future biographies" (Price *et al.*, 2000) of the collected objects.

Given the socially acceptable (i.e. culturally valued) nature of collecting and the personal nature of what is collected, it follows that mortality salience may serve as motivator for collectors and a driver of collecting behaviors.

Need for uniqueness

In the late 1970s, Snyder and Fromkin (1977) rejected the notion that all abnormal behaviors were necessarily maladaptive. They developed a theory of uniqueness that helps explain individuals who "convey a positive striving for differentness relative to other people" (Snyder and Fromkin, 1977, p. 518). This theory was then used as the starting point for a consumer-focused need for uniqueness scale (Tian *et al.*, 2001), which builds on Snyder and Fromkin's original scale to form a second order construct comprising three factors. First is *creative choice counterconformity*, which refers to the consumer seeking "social differentness from most others but making selections that would likely be considered good choices by those others" (Tian *et al.*, 2001, p. 52). Second is *unpopular choice counterconformity*, which refers to the "selection or use of products and brands that deviate from group norms and thus risk social disapproval that consumers withstand in order to establish their differentness from others" (Tian *et al.*, 2001, p. 52). And finally, *avoidance of similarity*, which refers to the "loss of interest in, or discontinued use of, possessions that become commonplace in order to move away from the norm and reestablish one's differentness" (Tian *et al.*, 2001, p. 53).

Because individuals extend themselves through their possessions (Belk, 1988) and collections tend to be important and personal to the collector, it follows that some collectors likely use their collections to express

their individuality and uniqueness. Their need for uniqueness would also likely serve as motivating factor driving collecting behaviors.

Brand attachment

For some collectors, brand is an integral and inextricable part of the collecting experience. Many collectors use branded products as the basis for their collections (e.g. Coca-Cola, Major League Baseball, Precious Memories, etc.) or they collect objects from multiple brands across a product category (e.g. whiskies, games, watches) (Slater, 2001). Whan Park *et al.* (2010) developed the construct of brand attachment to describe "the strength of the bond connecting the brand with the self" (Whan Park *et al.*, 2010, p. 2). This attachment is critical because it should impact behaviors that will help promote brand profitability and customer lifetime value. As collectors build their collections based on branded objects, the attachment they have toward the brand will likely grow and motivate further collecting behavior, namely acquisition.

Mortality salience, need for uniqueness and brand attachment are just a few of the potential dispositional variables that might play a role in motivating collecting behaviors. This is an area in need of extensive research attention, but extant literature does point toward a connection between collector dispositional variables and related collecting behaviors (e.g. mortality salience leading to the desire to control the future biographies of collected objects). Thus:

P3. Collecting motives drive collecting behaviors.

Goal feedback

I-D compensation theory states that the incidence of social psychological phenomena such as mortality salience are "moderated by the status of a person's relationship with the environment" (Martin, 1999, p. 195). Put simply, I-D compensation theory proposes "individuals function optimally when they receive frequent feedback that they are progressing toward their goals and that their efforts will pay off" (Martin, 1999, p. 199). A primary means by which individuals can measure goal progress on important issues is to compare their progress against others with similar goals, as is common in organizations (Ashford, 1986). In this conceptualization of the goal feedback construct, feedback would be measured by how the collector compares his or her collecting behaviors, collecting successes and external esteem against other collectors.

Goals are a critical influence on decision-making and guide consumer choice and behavior (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 1999). Because collecting is a highly goal-oriented activity, it follows that collectors seek feedback on their progress based on the motivation for the very behaviors associated with collecting. In fact, McIntosh and Schmeichel (2004, p. 85) conclude that "collectors are drawn to collecting as a means of bolstering the self by setting up goals that are tangible and provide the collector with concrete feedback of progress." Thus:

P4. Goal feedback strengthens the motivation to engage in social and solitary collecting behaviors.

Collecting behaviors and tension management

Collecting incorporates three comprehensive processes: acquisition, possession and disposition (Belk, 1982; Hanson, 1980). These are not collecting stages as the collector might be involved in all three processes simultaneously depending on the state of the collection and the motivations of the collector. For example, a collector might be in the process of adding a new object to a collection while also removing another item, all while current objects in the collection are admired, shared, cataloged, etc.

A thorough review of the consumer collecting literature reveals a number of collecting-related behaviors, each of which fits within the above collecting processes. Each also contributes to intra-process tensions related to

their social or solitary nature as described earlier. Table I illustrates the three processes of collecting and the tensions that exist between social and solitary collecting behaviors.

The acquisition process includes all those behaviors related to adding objects to one's collection. For example, tensions between *hunting* and *researching* are evident when the passion of hunting behavior takes hold and the consideration of price, quality and rarity determined through careful research are tossed aside (Danet and Katriel, 1994). *Networking* and *researching* behaviors may also breed tension in the collector. A collecting community often sets standards and value for collectibles (Carey, 2008) that may be at odds with the standards and values set by the individual collector through researching activities. A "priceless" collectible could have little or no value to a collector's social network. This may force the collector to reassess what type of value the object truly holds (perhaps nostalgic value rather than monetary).

Being a materialistic pursuit, collecting can also create tension related to feelings of envy and jealousy[1] (Belk, 1984), as when the collector is forced to evaluate his or her collection in light of competing collections. Jealousy can create materialistic tension between *sharing* and *displaying* collector behaviors within the possession process. This jealousy, like the envy possible during networking behaviors, is borne from the competitive nature of collecting. A collector must balance the desire to "show off" his or her collection with the reality that the collection then becomes public knowledge and potentially coveted by others. Tensions between c*onsulting* and *admiring* behaviors underscore the "business vs pleasure" tensions that can permeate collecting. On the one hand, the collecting activity may provide tremendous hedonic benefit to the collector and impart expert knowledge through many of the behaviors related to collecting. On the other hand, the collector risks blurring the lines between being an amateur and professional. Acquiring expert knowledge may shift the collector into the social role of expert and the collecting activity may then become "work" and lose its hedonic benefit (e.g. when a collector becomes a dealer). This transformation often takes place as collectors sell objects to upgrade their collections and the selling activity begins to take over (Rubel and Rosman, 2001). As Rubel and Rosman (2001, p. 323) point out, "scratch a dealer and you will find a collector".

Finally, the disposition process covers those behaviors involved in concluding the collection. The primary decision a collector must make is determining to whom the collection is transferred. This decision is commonly made toward the end of one's life, but this could also cover any instance where a collector feels the need to dispose of a collection. The social/solitary tension of the disposition process is revealed when a collector must answer the question: Will the collection be sold within a broader social network of fellow collectors, donated to another actor, or will the collection be kept personally close, willed to a family member or friend? This tension between liquidating and bequeathing can be one of the most difficult and emotional that any collector can face (Price *et al.*, 2000). Unfortunately, collectors that fail to make any decision may doom their collections to a dumpster or garage sale as they may become a burden for uninterested family members.

Collecting behaviors operate within each of the collecting processes. These behaviors often work at cross-purposes resulting in tensions that impact the collector across social/solitary activities. Thus:

P5. Collecting behaviors produce, maintain and alleviate social and solitary tensions.

Collector salient identity reinforcement

Kleine *et al.* (1993) use social-identity theory to tie products to people through their specific identities and that the importance (salience) of this identity "drives them to enact its behavior, using identity-associated products" (1993, p. 210). Further, Kleine *et al.* state that the "more identity-related things we have, the more empowered (ergo confident) we feel about our ability to perform in the identity" (Kleine *et al.*, 1993, p. 228). Extended to collecting behavior, the behaviors that result in the acquisition, possession and disposition of collections empower the activation and salience of the collector identity. Additionally, because individuals "give

prominence to those identities [they] perform well" (Kleine *et al.*, 1993, p. 224), the salient identity is further bolstered. Thus:

P6. Collecting behaviors reinforce the collector salient identity.

Discussion

Through the synthesis of collecting behavior literature and psychological and social psychological theories, this paper provides a conceptual model and research propositions to extend knowledge of consumer collecting behavior. specifically, the model proposes a collector salient identity and collecting motivations that drive tension-filled social and solitary collecting behaviors and these behaviors lead to a reinforcement of the collector salient identity. further, a number of dispositional constructs that may motivate collecting behaviors and a framework of social and solitary collecting behaviors organized by collecting process were presented.

The proposed conceptual model and theoretical insights also offer potential direction for managers as well as lead to questions which may drive future research. these are examined next.

Managerial relevance

The proposed conceptual model provides insight into how identity and motivation drive consumer collecting behavior and how tensions may operate between those behaviors. For managers at firms selling collectibles, providing collecting-oriented services, or managing collected brands, these insights may help in several ways.

Managers who are able to activate the collector salient identity or appeal directly to a consumer's identity as a collector might find the best results for their marketing efforts. But how does one activate a collector salient identity? Kleine *et al.* (1993) demonstrate that three components are key to the activation of identity salience. One, *social connections* is the ability for bonds with others focused on a particular activity (e.g. collecting) to predict identity salience around that activity (e.g. collector salient identity). Social connections have also been shown to increase the stability of the salient identity (Serpe, 1987). Managers could help activate the salience and increase the stability of the collector salient identity by encouraging brand collector meet-ups and by building brand communities (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Two, building off of social connections, *identity-related esteem* explains that identity salience is derived from the "appraisals received from social connections" (Kleine *et al.*, p. 224). To help activate the collector salient identity, a brand or service firm might reach out to current customers and ask for them to nominate fellow collectors that they admire. This could be used not only to activate the collector salient identity of the nominee but also as an opportunity to extend a special promotion to them as well. A brand or service firm could also mine public social media feeds to directly praise particularly impressive collectors. Three, identity salience is also strengthened by *media connections*. The more media a consumer consumes related to a particular identity, the more that identity becomes salient. For example, a collector that reads magazines, watches TV shows and follows YouTube channels related to their collecting, the more salient that identity will become. Astute managers should encourage cross-consumption of related media to strengthen the collector salient identity.

Another important consideration for managers is understanding the motivation behind why collectors collect. If collectors can be understood with respect to their motivations for collecting, then brands, sellers of collectibles, collecting service providers and other businesses can better target collectors. Consider the iconic "Generations" ad campaign from Patek Philippe, the makers of luxury timepieces. From a collecting and mortality salience perspective, the copy from the advertisement, "You never actually own a Patek Philippe, you merely look after it for the next generation" makes perfect sense. Buyers of these luxurious products, many of whom are watch collectors, likely receive great comfort knowing that their legacy will live on through future generations as their collections are handed down. Brands that fully understand the level of attachment that collectors have to their

brand can also make more informed decisions about how far to engage in promotions of collectible products. Should a brand overestimate the level of attachment collectors have for their products, and they are perceived as exploiting these most loyal customers, they risk customer alienation. Managers can also use knowledge of a collector's need for uniqueness to drive marketing strategy. Leveraging *creative choice counterconformity* (Tian *et al.*, 2001), marketers could communicate why a brand is worthy of collecting, while also highlighting the potential ways a product might make the collector positively stand out from his or her peers. For example, William Henry, a manufacturer of pocket knives and other men's accessories, positions itself as an "American brand creating timeless personal style for men" and a brand that "proudly retained the aura and feel of an artisan workshop, where most pieces are designed and created exclusively in limited, often unique editions" (William Henry, 2016). This luxury goods maker understands that "personal style" and "limited, often unique editions" helps position their brand as eminently collectible.

Finally, service industries can explore ways they can help collectors with their social and solitary collecting behaviors. There are numerous businesses devoted to helping collectors during the acquisition and disposition process of collecting, with eBay being the most well-known. Perhaps most famous is eBay, which started – apocryphally as it turns out – as a place for Pez dispenser collectors to have a place to buy and sell online. Where collectors get little help, however, is with the possession process of their collecting. Few businesses cater to collectors to help them share, consult, deal, display, admire, or catalog their collectibles. For example, an online service could provide a social platform to allow collectors to get to know each other, provide tools to help collectors share their collections, and designate experts in specific collectible categories. They could also provide tools to give individual collectors the ability to catalog their collections and offer recommendations for objects the collector might want to consider adding to the collection. Additionally, helping ameliorate the tensions between social and solitary collecting activities might be another value-add. For example, a service could provide advice on how to hunt for collectibles without falling victim to the zeal that can often cloud a collector's judgment on costs and other economic considerations.

Future research

There has been little empirical research on the subject of collecting behavior. To date, most research has focused on qualitative insights or literature reviews. While the proposed model is conceptual, it lays the groundwork for a theory-based empirical investigation of collecting behaviors and their relationship to identity. The included research propositions provide future research direction to validate the proposed conceptual model and have exposed several important gaps in our knowledge that require further investigation.

Below are a few of the research questions that marketing and consumer behavior scholars can address through the exploration of the themes presented here:

> *RQ1.* How do the tensions inherent in collecting impact the maintenance and disposition of existing collections and formation of new collections?
> *RQ2.* Do collectors view collecting as a competitive endeavor? If so, how does it impact their collecting strategies and how they view competing collectors?
> *RQ3.* How does collecting impact the relationship dynamic between collector and non-collector partners?
> *RQ4.* What does it mean for a collector if his or her collecting motives change? How does this impact what is collected or how the collection is maintained?
> *RQ5.* Which collecting behaviors disproportionately impact collecting salient identities?

In this paper, insights for a research agenda have been provided that, when pursued, would address the gaps in our knowledge with respect to consumer collecting behavior. Further investigation of the interplay between

identity, motivations and behaviors is an important step toward understanding this common and important consumer acquisitional activity.

Figures and Tables

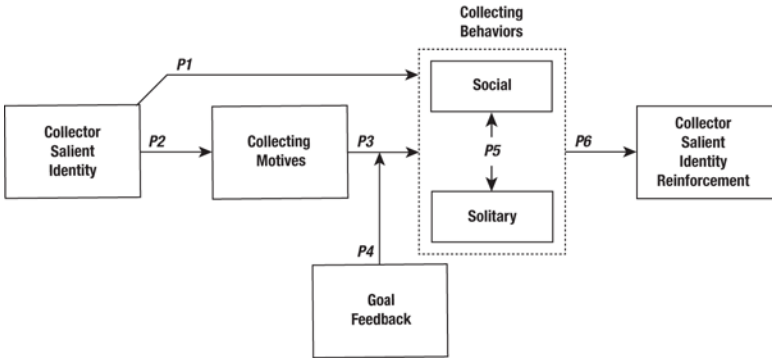

Figure 1. Conceptual model of drivers and outcomes of consumer collecting behavior

Table I. Social and solitary collecting behaviors

Collecting processes	**Collecting behaviors**		
	Social	**vs**	**Solitary**
Acquisition	*Hunting* (Formanek, 1994; Long and Schiffman, 1997); *networking* (Long and Schiffman, 1997); *trading* (Belk *et al.*, 1988)		*Researching* (McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004; Danet and Katriel, 1986; Danet and Katriel, 1994); *planning* (McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004)
Possession	*Sharing* (Hughes and Hogg, 2006); *consulting* (Hughes and Hogg, 2006; McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004); *dealing* (Rubel and Rosman, 2001)		*Displaying* (McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004); *admiring* (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982); *cataloging* (Hughes and Hogg, 2006)
Disposition	*Selling* (Price *et al.*, 2000); *trading* (Belk *et al.*, 1988)		*Bequeathing* (Price *et al.*, 2000)

Notes

1. Belk (1984, p. 292) draws a distinction between envy and jealousy; envy "is applied only to others' possessions," while jealousy "is a characteristic applied to one's own possessions."

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