Special Session: Beyond Gender Generalizations: Re-Examining Gender in the Context of Collecting

Pauline Maclaran, De Montfort University
Cele Otnes, University of Illinois at Champaign Urban
Eileen Fischer, Schulich School of Business, York University
Karin M Ekstrom|Nia Hughes|Margaret K Hogg, School of Economics and Commercial Law, Göteborg University|Keele University|Manchester School of Management, UMIST

MAIN GOALS OF THE SESSION

The purpose of this session is to reexamine the link between gender and a particular form of consumption behavior: collecting. Our goals in so doing are first, to amplify our understanding of gender as an analytic construct and, second, to deepen our understandings of the activity of collecting. In general, we wish to go beyond existing understandings of the nature of collecting, the nature of gender, and the links between gender and collecting. In extending our understanding of collecting, this session seeks to explore more fully how the activity is embedded in the co-constructed social lives of consumers. Much previous work on collecting has focused on understanding how collecting reflects and constructs the individual collector’s identity, particularly their gender identity. The papers here incorporate a concern with gender identity construction, but go beyond a focus on the individual male or female collector to consider the broader set of social relationships and/or the social context and how these shape collecting behaviors. In extending our understanding of gender as an analytic construct, this session aims to challenge the tacit “bio-reductionism” that prevails in certain work that considers connections between gender and consumption behavior. Bioreductionism refers to the tendency toward reified accounts of masculine/feminine differences that tacitly or overtly aligns these differences with biological maleness versus femaleness (cf. Lancaster 2003). In stressing gender differences, this work tends to overlook within-gender variability and between-gender comparability. It tends also to render gender differences as relatively immutable.

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Literature Review: Collecting as a Gendered Activity.

Collecting as a gender activity has attracted considerable attention from students of contemporary consumer culture. One achievement of this prior literature has been to recognize and challenge tendencies to valorize that
which men traditionally collect and to
devalue that which women may have
collected. So, for example, Saisselin
(1984, p. 68) contends that historically
men’s collections have been viewed as
serious and purposeful, while women’s
have been perceived as “frivolous”
accumulations. Women’s hoards of
dresses, shoes, perfumes, china and the
like have only infrequently and recently
been regarded as meaningful collections,
whereas men’s collections of cars, guns
or art have been, and to some extent still
are, more likely to be regarded as having
a clear-cut thematic emphasis and externally agreed upon standards
(Baekeland, 1981).

This laudable effort to recognize the
tendency to valorize some collecting
behaviors and devalue others, however,
has entailed an unintended consequence.
It has, seemingly, led to a plethora of
research that has focused on differences
between men and women as collectors,
and that has in effect constructed the
activity as though it entailed two separate
geographies to explore: that of men’s
collecting versus that of women’s
collecting. Indeed, every element of the
collecting has been considered from
“men do this/women do that” angle.

Specifically, collecting has been studied
to discern differences between men and
women in the types of object collected
and in the processes and meanings
involved in collecting. In terms of
objects collected, generalizations from
prior research suggest that men’s
collections feature more “authentic” art
and antiques, more sporting related
material, more machinery, and more
military goods such as guns or other
weapons. In contrast, the literature
characterizes women as collecting more
“inauthentic” goods, such as
manufactured collectables, decorative
items such as ornaments, tourist material,
household goods, jewellery and pop
material (e.g. Belk et al 1991, Pearce,
1998).

In terms of the process and meaning of
collecting, women have been
characterized as undertaking an
essentially domestic activity. Belk et al
(1991) suggest that women both produce
and reproduce consumption in their
collecting, while men engage in an
exercise of proactive mastery when they
collect. They claim that collecting
enables males to celebrate aggressive
behaviors abetting commerce or the hunt,
and ultimately shaping the realm of
political economy while it enables
females to enact behaviors creating
household nurturance, which shape
domestic economy.

The possibility explored in this session is
that, in the process of exploring
collecting as a set of gendered
geographies, the literature has
inadvertently reified categorical
male/female differences and reinforced
gender stereotypes. The implication of
the prior research, intended or otherwise,
would appear to be that sharply defined
and differentiated gender roles are played
out in the context of collecting, and that
gender thus plays a large and independent
role in shaping collecting behavior.

In this session, we revisit collecting in
order to avoid both an over-simplification
of our understanding of gendered
collecting behaviors and an over-
simplification of the very construct of
gender. Our papers acknowledge that
while differences in how some men and
some women collect can be observed,
detailed analysis may identify patterns of and reasons for within-gender heterogeneity and between-gender similarities.

Specifically, in their paper entitled “Problematizing gendered interpretations of collecting behaviour,” Hughes and Hogg examine the interplay between gender and ownership of a collection in the context of ongoing social dyads that exists for purposes well beyond that of sharing collecting experiences, or co-collecting. Their aim is to develop oppositional arguments and cases that reveal more fully the continuum of gender identities made possible through collecting, and in doing so, to challenge the reification of male/female differences in collecting practice and literature. The analysis of their data indicates significant differences between masculine and feminine collecting styles that are not necessarily congruent with male and female collectors respectively. For example, within the dyads they studied, they found that the masculine metaphor of a competitive hunt for objects (Belk, 2001) applied equally to females. Male partners often displayed more feminine, passive approaches to collecting practice. Within the dyads there was no obvious sense of symbolic threat posed by the female to the male’s control of capital and power (Belk and Wallendorf, 1997), and the sense of mastery that collecting is usually deemed to confer upon males (as previously theorized by, for example, Danet and Katriel, 1986) was also claimed by the proactive female collectors in our study.

In her paper on “Swedish Men collecting Swedish Art Glass” Ekstrom studies how a particular class of product that has complex layers of local and national significance is woven into the identifies of male collectors. By focusing upon a collecting category with multiple levels of significance, ranging from the social connection that objects provide to loved one, through to the national identity at history that the objects signify, Ekstrom is able to richly portray the multiple factors other than gender norms that inform the behavior of male collector, and that may lead men to engage in “feminine” types of behavior.

Finally, in their paper entitled “Performing Gender in the Context of Collecting British Royal Family Memorabilia: A Class Act?” Ottes, Maclaran and Fischer explore how men and women of varied nationalities and social classes collect the same category of good. This paper highlights how class or habitus appears to influence collecting, and analyzes how gendered performances of a given consumer behavior may be nuanced or even overridden by social factors other than gender.

As these summaries indicate, the papers in this session differ in focus, but have in common a concern to reexamine collecting with a view to better understanding the full scope of its relationship to gender. Ultimately these papers seek to further nuance our understanding of gender and consumer behavior.
PAPER ABSTRACTS

PROBLEMATIZING GENDERED INTERPRETATIONS OF COLLECTING BEHAVIOUR

Our aim in this paper is to offer a more refined and detailed description of men and women’s behaviours in collecting dyads, in order to reveal more fully the continuum of gender identities made possible through collecting, and in doing so, to challenge the existing reification of male/female differences in collecting practice and literature. We report findings from our empirical work, and suggest how current theory needs to be refined to account for the feminised practices shown by male collectors in our collecting dyads, and also the more masculine practices on the part of females within our dyads.

Earlier work has identified distinct gender patterns in relation to collecting and possessions (Eccles, 1968; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988; Pearce, 1998; Belk 2001) and more generally to the investment of goods and possessions with meaning (e.g. Dittmar 1992). In the specific context of collecting, gender differences have been observed to exist firstly in the gendered process or activity of collecting (how collecting is done); secondly in the type of object collected; and thirdly in how collectors use their collections symbolically to reflect or construct gender identity (Belk and Wallendorf, 1997; Belk, 2001).

Whilst acknowledging the existence of the dominant, dichotomous themes of collecting that broadly contrast male competitiveness (for scientific, natural or high art objects) to female self-expressiveness (in relation to decorative objects displayed in the home), we would assert that little empirical evidence has been offered to date that illustrates a more complex interplay of individual gender identities. In this paper, we seek to correct this imbalance by outlining examples of the feminised practices shown by male collectors in our collecting dyads, and also the more masculine practices on the part of females within our dyads.

Our longitudinal field study focused on couples who are collectors. A series of long dyadic interviews held inside the collectors’ homes allowed us to examine gender not by direct questions but through exploration of how gendered consumption practice is grounded in the process of selecting, acquiring, displaying, using and disposing of collected objects. Our study was conducted in the context of ongoing social interaction between the couple dyads and their social circles, that is, in a context where gender roles and boundaries (in collecting and indeed, in life more generally) are negotiated between individuals on an ongoing basis.

Our aim here is to develop oppositional arguments and cases that reveal more fully the continuum of gender identities made possible through collecting, and in doing so, we challenge the reification of male/female differences in collecting practice and literature. The themes that emerge from our data show significant differences between masculine and feminine collecting styles that are not
necessarily congruent with male and female collectors respectively. Instrumentality and self-expressiveness (Dittmar, 1992) may occur in oppositional ways and we offer evidence of instrumental females and self-expressive males. Within some of our dyads, the (mis)appropriation of ownership of the collected objects by the male resulted in masculine re-assertions of ownership of the collection by the females: that is, they verbally reappropriated or reclaimed the objects as their own, in an effort perhaps to preserve the contribution that those objects make to their personal, social and gender identity and extended self (Belk, 1988). In our dyads, the masculine metaphor of a competitive hunt for objects (Belk, 2001) applied equally to females, with their male partners often displaying more feminine, passive approaches to collecting practice. In our dyads there was no obvious sense of symbolic threat posed by the female to the male’s control of capital and power (Belk and Wallendorf, 1997), and the sense of mastery that collecting is usually deemed to confer upon males (as previously theorized by, for example, Danet and Katriel, 1986) was also claimed by the proactive female collectors in our study.

Clearly, membership of the dyad may lead to different constructions of gender identity than might occur in the case of individual collectors. However, given that most collectors are in fact situated in partner or marriage dyads (Pierce, 1998), then our qualitative data from a small number of collecting dyads cannot be supposed to be exceptional, despite the lack of research in this specific area of collecting and in consumption more generally.

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**SWEDISH MEN COLLECTING SWEDISH ART GLASS**

The purpose of this paper is to explore how Swedish men collect Swedish art glass. In total, 24 persons belonging to a glass society have been interviewed about their collections. 23 of them were men and one was a woman who shared her interest with her husband. The paper challenges the bio-reductionist account of gender. Masculinity is viewed as socially constructed (e.g., Connell 1995, 1996). Personal experience from the glass factory or the region surrounding it, relationship to glass designers and glass blowers as well as affiliation with a glass organization appear as important for the men’s passion for glass. In five families where the men shared their interest with their wives, the wives were also interviewed. Collecting may bond couples, particularly if the children have left the home (Belk and Wallendorf 1994). Among the couples, it appears as if it is predominantly the men making the decisions to purchase the glass. A reason could be that men historically have had higher incomes than women. It has been discussed that female collectors can be a threat to male control of capital and power in society (Belk and Wallendorf 1994).

The paper challenges the traditional separation of tasks in the homes (e.g., Firat 1994), i.e., that it is the women who care for the decorative items. Collecting aspects such as curating and maintaining have historically been considered feminine, while acquisition has been viewed as a masculine (Belk and Wallendorf 1994). The interviews gave several examples of how the men arrange the items at home, emphasizing the visual enjoyment, the fragile nature of glass, the importance of light and no dust. The collections are for the most part older art glass. A majority of the older art glass has historically been designed by men. The glass blowers are traditionally men, while the glass painters are women.

Collections represent consumption in that the collectible items are acquired, used and disposed of, but also production in that a collector produces his/her own collection. A collector also produces him/herself as a collector. The paper shows that collecting is dynamic, items are added, moved around, relations formed to other collectors and glass designers. In the analysis, different themes have been identified. The search for provenance, the glass object’s origin, where it has been made and by whom was discussed. The creation of glass and contact with glass makers was emphasized. The collectors expressed curiosity and interest to learn more about glass. Nostalgia was noticeable. Many of the collectors had experience from this part of Sweden where most of the glass has been and still is produced. Glass objects which had been produced by relatives were particularly precious. In a turbulent world, collecting can represent stability (Belk 1995). The men expressed during the interviews that they are anxious that this history does not end. Furthermore, the social interaction related to collecting was also emphasized. The collectors enjoyed meeting other people at the glass society and to learn about glass from each other. Collecting was a form of relaxation from the mundane everyday life. Pride was expressed during the interviews, it was recognized that the collections were part of the collector’s
souls. Finally, collecting can be viewed as noble; the collectors save things that only a few people appreciate.

**REFERENCES**


**PERFORMING GENDER IN THE CONTEXT OF COLLECTING BRITISH ROYAL FAMILY MEMORABILIA: A CLASS ACT?**

The core concern of this paper is to examine and challenge accounts of tacitly bio-reductionist accounts of gendered consumer behavior, and to examine how other social categories, such as class or habitus, intersect with socially constructed notions of gender in shaping the enactment of particular consumer behavior.

Our work is grounded in a on-going study of men and women who collect artifacts that commemorate the British Royal Family. Using data collected from British, American, Irish, and Canadian collectors, it explores the themes and meanings that characterize the collecting experience for both men and women.

In the analysis developed for this paper, the authors take as their point of departure work on collecting that has identified stark contrasts between how men collect versus how women collect, and that have the potential to reduce gendered consumer behavior in this context to a simple “men do this, while women do that” account.

For example, Belk and colleagues (1991) compare the collections of a man and his deceased wife as follows, with the first element of each pair representing the female style of collecting the second representing the male style of collecting:

- tiny things versus gigantic things;
- weak things versus strong things;
- things that connote home versus things that connote the world;
- things that are “of” nature versus things that entail machines;
- things that are nurturing versus things that are extinguishing;
- things that are art related versus things that are science related;
- things that are playful versus serious;
- things that are decorative versus functional;
- things that are inconspicuous versus conspicuous, and
- things that are animate versus inanimate.

Belk and his co-authors state that these binary oppositions effectively capture the
gender differences found in the entire set of collections they investigated. While acknowledging that collecting as activity could entail behaviors that are stereotypically masculine as well as those that are stereotypically feminine (i.e. acquisition may require aggressive competition and mastery but preservation of a collection requires care, creativity, and nurturance) the take-away message of Belk’s work and that of many others is that men as a group do collecting differently from women as a group.

In our analysis of interviews with collectors of British Royal Family memorabilia, then, we first seek to identify the range of themes that characterize our informants’ collecting behavior, and then to ask whether these themes are solely located within the behaviors of one sex versus the other. We then go on to look at other ways of grouping our informants that might help to account for apparent between-collector differences that we observe.

Some of the themes that we identify include connecting with (“English”) values, connecting with celebrity, connecting with social networks, demonstrating domain expertise, demonstrating consumer skills, and demonstrating taste. Interestingly, themes such as connecting with social networks which have been associated with “women’s ways of collecting” are not unequivocally the domain of women. Nearly every informant described some way in which their collection allowed them to form bonds with others, all the while distinguishing themselves from those others. Similarly, such seemingly masculine themes as demonstrating expertise or competitive ability are not unequivocally the domain of men in our sample. Women as well as men articulated their pride in being both knowledgeable and effective at getting what they wanted.

Grouping consumers into those of lower cultural capital and those of higher cultural capital appears to provide an alternate, and in some instances more effective, way of understanding uneven distributions of approaches to and meanings of collecting. For example, demonstrating consumer skills of bargain hunting is more comfortably articulated by those who appear to have lower to moderate levels of cultural capital, while demonstrating taste appears to have a greater emphasis among those of somewhat higher cultural capital.

In exploring how social class/cultural capital informs collecting and helps to account for behaviors that might otherwise be attributed to gender, we wish not to substitute class for gender as an axis for understanding collecting, but rather to nuance and challenge existing understandings of gender.

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