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The Collecting Continuum: Incorporating Amateur Scientists and Scholarly Collecting Behaviors

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Prior collecting research has largely failed to address “scientific” or “scholarly” collecting behaviors. We propose a taxonomy of collectors, grounded in theories of serious leisure and the amateur/professional continuum, that more accurately distinguishes between typical consumer collectors and their scientific counterparts. We support the taxonomy through textual analysis and in-depth interviews with collectors of natural history objects. Given the current popularity of natural history collections and growing societal pressures against their private ownership, we discuss the internal conflicts such collectors face to expand/complete their collections in a socially responsible manner. Our study contributes to both the collection and motivation literature.

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The Collecting Continuum: Incorporating Amateur Scientists and Scholarly Collecting Behaviors

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Natural history collections have seen a resurgence in popularity in recent years. Wealthy collectors from around the world successfully compete with museums to obtain rare specimens such as complete dinosaur skeletons. Tiny yet rare seashells can sell for thousands of dollars. Even ordinary collectors with limited funds can purchase fossils and archaeological treasures online. However, such collectors increasingly find themselves at odds with environmentalist sentiments and societal norms, manifested in calls for legislation to close collecting sites to non-scientists and preserve finds solely for the benefit of the general public. Thus developing an better understanding of the collecting behaviors of these individuals is important not only from a consumer behavior perspective (due to the large amounts of money exchanged), but also to society as a whole, so that responsible collecting behaviors can be encouraged while still allowing individuals to fulfill their innate need to “collect things.”

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, 1995, p.479). Collecting is differentiated from hoarding, accumulating, investment acquisitions, and ordinary consumption. It is viewed as a form of “materialistic luxury consumption,” as the collected objects have been removed from their ordinary use or instrumental purpose (Belk, 1995). A “true” collection is believed to assume such importance to the collector that it will not be dispensed with unless absolutely necessary (Pearce, 1992).

Prior research has classified collectors based on either their *motivations for collecting* (see McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004), *level of interest* (Wright and Ray, 1969), *types of objects collected* (Bryant, 1989), or overall *mode of collecting* (Danet and Katriel, 1989). While specific types of collections (e.g., stamp, book, teapot) have been investigated, researchers have tended to make generalized statements about all collectors, while pointing out that many exceptions occur. Most notably, prior literature has discussed in passing, but never clearly delineated, “scholarly” or “scientific” collecting. We argue that the motives, behaviors, and characteristics of “amateur scientist” collectors (i.e., advanced collectors in fields possessing professional counterparts, such as the natural sciences), like those of their counterparts, can differ substantially from those of the collecting population at large.

In particular, altruistic motives for collecting have been largely ignored or discounted. This results from the view that collecting to preserve items for future generations is simply a personal justification for extreme collecting behaviors, rather than a legitimate motivation (Belk, 1995). In other cases, such collecting has been associated with a personal need for purpose and destiny, and thus with a goal of achieving immortality (McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004). However, fossil and artifact collectors have historically donated specimens to museums, provided curators with important scientific information on their finds, and assisted research efforts in numerous other ways, often without demanding any special recognition in return. Thus, is a denial of altruistic or selfless motives for collecting always appropriate where scientific collecting is concerned? Do amateur scientists truly donate only because the “pursuit is more important than the possession” (Belk et al., 1988)? Conversely, do institutional scholars always have altruistic motives for the collecting undertaken in their own jobs?

Using natural history collecting as a backdrop, and drawing from the author’s own years of experience as an amateur paleontologist, we present a series of hypothesized differences between “typical” consumer collecting (as described in Belk, 1995) and “scientific” or “scholarly” collecting. We further propose a new taxonomy of collectors, grounded in theories of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1979) and the amateur/professional continuum (Leadbeater and Miller, 2004), and incorporating features of past classification schemes, that includes all types of collectors while more accurately representing “scientific” or “scholarly” collecting.

On one end of the continuum are dabblers, novices, and casual collectors. Three different branches may occur from here (representing commercial, “popular,” and scientific collecting). In the realm of “popular” (e.g., stamp, coin) collecting, serious hobbyists may become “scholarly” hobbyists, but no true professional counterpart exists. In the realm of scientific collecting, devoted amateurs may become proams, the latter of which have professional/scholarly counterparts.

This taxonomy focuses on differentiating collectors at each major stage on the continuum based on *form, scope, expertise, motivation, and roles*. Overall, the continuum represents a transition not just from *undisciplined* to *disciplined* collecting behaviors, but also from *individualism* to *collectivism*. As we move further along each branch of the continuum, collectors exhibit an increasingly research-oriented approach to collecting, a narrower collecting focus, more specialized knowledge, and “altruistic” behavior.

Two phases of data collection support the proposed taxonomy. The first phase involved textual analysis of archived content from a listserv that promotes modern seashell collecting. Coding and analysis of discussions on the purpose and value of shell collecting indicate tension between casual collectors (interested primarily in the beauty of shells, enjoyment of collecting activities, or building of social bonds), and more advanced collectors (who, while sharing some of these interests, work closely with professional scientists and are very concerned with limiting the harm, via destruction of habitats and entire species populations, caused by widespread shell collecting). The latter group intentionally restricts their collecting activities to prevent environmental damage.

The second phase consists of a series of in-depth (1-2 hour), semi-structured interviews with fossil collectors ranging from novices and amateur scientists to institutional scholars. Findings indicate that many collectors (including professionals) feel conflicted by the internal compulsion to increase/complete their collections while still acting “responsibly.” Of particular interest are experiences and events that lead some collectors to move from one end of the continuum to the other over time. By determining what motivates a collector to work more closely with professionals, become more scholarly in their approach, and even relinquish valued specimens in their collection, we can inform research institutions on how to improve relations with amateur collectors and motivate them to collect in more “socially responsible” ways. Thus this study contributes not only to the collecting literature, but also informs the literature on individual motivation, particularly in regards to the practice of socially responsible behavior.