The Scrapbook As an Autobiographical Memory Tool

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This study explores how consumers collect, preserve, and reconstruct autobiographical memories through the material possession of the scrapbook. Interviews were conducted with twenty women who scrapbook as a hobby. The Possession Memory Framework was constructed to describe three activities: collection of memory, preservation of memory, and reconstruction of memory.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Autobiographical memories are “recollections of self-referenced information gleaned from everyday life events” (Barclay and Subramaniam 1987, 169). Autobiographical memories do not exist as separate, individual thoughts but are connected by consumers in personal autobiographies of the self. Autobiographies are “stories we tell about our lives” that are constructed as a “continuing interpretation and reinterpretation of our experience” (Bruner 1987, 11-12). Culture makes available certain narrative tools to create autobiographies, such as family stories, diaries, genealogies, and other written accounts. These narrative tools are possessions that have the power to organize memory.

This paper examines the role of narrative tools in the autobiographical memory process; the goal is a rich understanding of the collection, preservation, and reconstruction of autobiographical memory through material possessions. The context for this study is the popular hobby of scrapbooking. A scrapbook is a blank book in which photographs and other paper ephemera are pasted for memory preservation (Christensen 2011). In the United States alone, 4.5 million people participate in scrapbooking and it is a fast-growing sector of the hobby industry with retail sales of $1.45 billion in 2011 (Scrapbooking.com 2011). Scrapbooks have been called the “material manifestation of memory” (Tucker, Ott, and Buckler 2006, 3) because they are consciously designed to collect and construct autobiographical memories. Consequently, this study uses in-depth interviews with women who scrapbook as a hobby to examine how these consumers collect, preserve, and reconstruct autobiographical memories through the material possession of the scrapbook.

Method

Individual depth interviews were conducted with twenty women who participated in scrapbooking as a hobby. Each semi-structured interview asked when and how the participant became involved in scrapbooking, how many hours per week she scrapbooked, and her motivation and process. Then, the participant was asked to display her pages, explain how she had made them, and discuss what she liked and disliked about them. The interviews were analyzed using a grounded theory method (Corbin and Strauss 2007) where findings are allowed to emerge from the data in an inductive manner. The researcher conducted open, axial, and selective coding to identify themes and create the model. The outcome is the Possession Memory Framework presented in Figure 1 and explained below.

Findings

Collection of Memory

The first step in the Possession Memory Framework is the collection of photographs and other ephemera to be included in the scrapbook. Scrapbookers worry that if the right memory markers are not collected, the memory may be irretrievable and lost forever. What is collected and saved is based on a judgment of future value made in the present moment, but scrapbookers in this study were not always sure what they would wish to remember in the future. Consequently, scrapbookers collect many items which non-scrapbookers consider to be rubbish. From the information provided by the scrapbookers, it is plain that the collection of autobiographical memory markers is a premeditated and conscious process, fraught with concern for missing important markers or selecting the wrong markers in the moment.

To compensate for these fears, scrapbookers ‘over-save’ markers and plan their scrapbook pages in great detail.

Preservation of Memory

The second step in the possession memory framework is the preservation of memory through the construction of the scrapbook from the items collected. The first thing that is preserved in the scrapbook is the story of the event depicted in the photographs. Because these anecdotes protect memory, almost all of the scrapbookers asserted that they would not remove or alter their scrapbook pages once they were completed. Scrapbookers also implicitly preserved other types of memories in their albums. The first of these is the memory of the scrapbook creator and her creative identity at the time of scrapbook construction. The final type of memory that is preserved in the scrapbook is a collective, or social memory. Beyond bringing to mind the social connections depicted in the photographs, the scrapbooks evoked memories of the social networks used to create the scrapbook itself.

Reconstruction of Memory

The third step in the possession memory framework is the reconstruction of autobiographical memory through reviewing the scrapbook. Based on the interview data, scrapbooks lend themselves to four types of memory reconstruction.

Introspection. One of the ways scrapbookers use their finished albums to cue autobiographical memory is to view them alone in the present time. Introspection provides a method of weaving together memories into an autobiography of identity. This process is not simply remembering an event, but incorporating the memory of that event into a coherent understanding of the self.

Reunion. Scrapbookers also mentioned that they expected to view their albums by themselves in the future. This focus on satisfying the future self links back to the over-collection of memory markers by scrapbookers and the planning of scrapbook construction in great detail, for one can never fully know what the future self may want to remember.

Performance. The memories cued by scrapbooks are not just reconstructed in solitary contemplation, but in the presence of others as well; this is the ‘performance’ aspect of scrapbooks, where scrapbooks are shared with social networks. This type of reconstructive performance (a) affirms strength and continuity of social relationships, (b) socializes one’s own children into the correct manner of ‘doing’ memory work, and (c) acts as a display of the self-identity of the maker.

Legacy. The last type of memory reconstruction permitted by the scrapbook is that which will be done by others in the far future, often after the scrapbooker is gone. The idea that unknown future others will be reconstructing memories from the scrapbook without personal narration from its maker causes many of the participants to worry about the adequacy of their journaling and event narration.

The findings of the current study have implications for marketing theory regarding heirloom possessions, the disposal of possessions, and computer-aided memory technologies.

REFERENCES


