



Kids As Collectors: a Phenomenological Study of First and Fifth Graders

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ABSTRACT - This paper presents the results of interviews with 79 children, 72 of whom had a collection (or collection) of another. We observed that the type of collections which children pursue depends upon the ease of entry (i.e., cost, gender norms, and current fads started by movies or cartoons). The primary objective of this study was to explore children's collecting behaviors using a phenomenological philosophy. We suggest that children are motivated to collect (1) to enjoy the process of collecting as it allows them to escape boredom and sometimes reality, (2) to learn or satisfy curiosity in a domain, (3) to satiate a passion for the objects which are desired, (4) to want to differentiate themselves from others, and (5) to collect with others, especially family and friends. Although one of the above motives was illustrated in each of the interviews, children often have multiple motives for collecting.

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KIDS AS COLLECTORS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FIRST AND FIFTH GRADE CHILDREN

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This paper presents the results of interviews with 79 children, 72 of whom had a collection (or collections) of one or more items. It was observed that the type of collections which children pursue depends upon the ease of entry (i.e., cost) into a collection, social norms, and current fads started by movies or cartoons. The primary objective of this study was to explore the motives for collecting behaviors using a phenomenological philosophy. We suggest that children are motivated to collect because (1) the process of collecting as it allows them to escape boredom and sometimes reality, (2) learn or satisfy curiosity about the objects, (3) satiate a passion for the objects which are desired, (4) want to differentiate themselves from others, and (5) desire approval from especially family and friends. Although one of the above motives was illustrated in each of the interviews, the text suggests that children have multiple motives for collecting.

INTRODUCTION

According to recent statistics, child consumers had an estimated \$9 billion income in 1989, but influenced purchases of over \$16.9 billion (greater than the GNP of Taiwan) (McNeal 1992). This influence came in three primary areas: items for themselves (e.g., toys, clothing, supplies), items for the home (e.g., stereos), and items for the family (e.g., food). As these figures suggest, children have a great deal of spending power, which is particularly significant because almost all of their income and influence goes toward purchases. In fact, children between the ages of 2 and 12 influence purchases of over \$16.9 billion for play items per year and influence purchases of over \$1.5 billion for "hobby items" (McNeal 1992). Many of the hobby-related purchases are likely to be items which will be added to a collection.

Collecting is prevalent in consumer cultures; in fact, Schiffer, Downing, and McCarthy (1981) found that just over 50% of households which they surveyed had at least one collection, with the average of 2.6 per household. The motivations for collecting behaviors have received a considerable amount of attention in the popular press as well as in the academic literature. Most recent reports have focused on adults and have failed to consider child consumers and their motivations for collecting. This paper suggests:

If a child collects, he is very rarely a connoisseur, being chiefly interested in quantity and not caring for quality or aesthetic considerations. But with age and the acquisition of a sense of value, often derived from the experience of collecting, a child shows in miniature the psychological pressures that urge its parents to collect. In fact, of adults, more attention should be paid to the motives that oblige people to find an emotional outlet in collecting than to any other form of collecting (p. 22).

The objective of this paper is to explore the motives of collecting for children in the first and fifth grades. First, the motives for collecting will be reviewed. Next, the research approach will be explained. After a discussion of the results we encountered in this study, the motives underlying children's collecting behavior are explored. The paper concludes with motives with which the collecting process is approached and the task effects of the process aid children in their search for identity.

MOTIVATIONS FOR COLLECTING

Perusing the literature in consumer research, developmental psychology, and social psychology as well as articles in the popular press makes it obvious that a variety of motivations for collecting have been offered. In a true Freudian fashion, Freud (1908) suggests that adult collecting is the result of unresolved childhood fantasies. Even, if this view of the motives underlying adult collecting behaviors is accepted, the motivations for children's collecting behaviors are still uncertain.

In one of the most comprehensive explorations of collecting in consumer research, Belk et al. (1991) suggest that two motives can be used to explain collecting: legitimization and self-extension. Legitimization motives are characterized by collecting within boundaries which the social world will accept. The authors suggest that this process begins in childhood as child collecting is done for "rational" purposes (e.g., creating, investing, building history) is not considered to be self-indulgent if it is done for "irrational" purposes. Self-extension motives are characterized by a desire to enhance or improve the self. In fact, Belk (1988) suggests that collecting may symbolically complete the self.

In another study of collectors, Formanek (1991) found that respondents were motivated by investment, obsessive-compulsive, and

legitimization of the personal and social self. She found that across all kinds of motivations, the one thing all collectors had in common was their passion for the items which they collect.

RESEARCH APPROACH

Regardless of the manner in which motivations are labeled, the energized state results in the collector working to acquire more items for the collection. In this paper, we seek to delve into the meaning of the motivations which drive these collecting activities. This research question was approached using a phenomenological philosophy which allows one to explore a phenomenon as an informant consciously perceives it (Moustakas 1994).

Approximately 90 first and fifth grade students were interviewed about their consumption experiences with advanced toys. Because of time constraints, the topic of collecting was broached in only 79 of these interviews. Because we wanted to explore collecting experiences mean to young children, we chose to look at children in the first and fifth grades. Our ratio of 6 (first grade) would just be starting to accumulate their own things and would be in the earliest stage it seemed appropriate for conversation. By age 11 (fifth grade), children are becoming more independent and make or help make more meaningful decisions. In addition, because of maturation, they are more independent in their decision making than first graders.

TABLE 1

TYPES OF CHILDREN'S COLLECTIONS

The textural descriptions which are presented in this paper were obtained through interviews which were conducted by members of an undergraduate directed-study course in marketing. The students who participated in the project were given assignments for reading materials on qualitative research, interviewing children, and collecting (e.g., Belk et al. 1988); attending to the needs of interviewing children; conducting interviews with first and fifth grade students; transcribing the interviews verbatim; and identifying themes from the text. They received feedback at each level of the project.

The perceptions of the children were our primary interest in the interviews as we explored why children believe in collecting a collection. Thus, the grand tour question sought to determine "what is it about collecting that children like?" To encourage them to tell us stories about when they acquired new items for their collections and by asking "what makes new items special to you when you collect things?" and "what do you think about when you collect?"

The children talked with the interviewers about collecting for between 5 and 25 minutes; the variability of time was due to different levels of involvement with collecting, but the child's attention span also was an important factor in the length of time they were able to participate, the children received two movie passes. Parental permission was obtained for all informants.

TYPES OF COLLECTIONS

Of the 79 children who were interviewed about collecting, only 7 did not consider themselves to be collectors or to have a collection of any kind. Of those that responded to our collecting questions, only two had to be given a hint as to what a collection was (both were in the first grade). The interviewers told these two respondents that a collection was a group of "special things that you like to have."

Table 1 illustrates the favorite types of collections which our informants said they looked for and enjoyed getting (and the gifts which they had solicited). In some cases the children had multiple collections, but we asked them to focus on their two favorite collection(s).

These lists of items which children collect offer insight into children's collecting behaviors. A number of children were interviewed about maintaining their collections. Some like Sarah (1st) enjoy naming every item; she collects stuffed kittens "because I like to name it." Others spent time cleaning their collectibles. Brayha (1st) said her rocks were:

like clothes...everyday when I get them I like wash them and then I put them on my dresser and then when they get dirty I wash them again.

Stephanie (5th) would put a little note by each of the special rocks she had. She said:

One time when we were playing on the playground we stuffed our pockets full of rocks but my friends took theirs out. I didn't. I took them home and washed them and put them in my collection.

Other children keep lists of all their items, and several had special cases or shelves for them. For example, Lukas

For my birthday I got this rock case, this big rock case my dad made, and I shelve all these glazed stuff and it has a purple light, you know white light you just turn on the knob and it can be purple turn it off, and turn on the white one or both.

It is obvious that these children put a great deal of effort into building a collection (e.g., searching for rocks or building a collection in order).

Ease of entry is an important component of the type of collection children pursue, as evidenced by the prominent items picked up without cost (e.g., rocks) and received as a small gift (e.g., trolls for first grade females and Jurassic Park for males). The items collected by the older children were generally of a greater cost. Gender norms seem to affect collecting: females are likely to collect stuffed animals (35%) and males are likely to collect sports cards (58%). The list also includes collections including rocks and stuffed animals; however the influence of movies, cartoons, and advertising is also evident. Current fads include dinosaurs and Jurassic Park "things" as well as Garfield "stuff" and trolls. Perhaps, when this generation grows up these fad items will be among their desires, as Pez dispensers are now for adults who lived through that fad. Or,

CHILDREN'S COLLECTING MOTIVES

Although first and fifth grade children do not have the words to articulate their feelings to the degree that adults do, they express the goals they have in their collecting and enjoy talking about it. However, they are more likely to do this than to explain why they do them. For several of the younger informants, the notion of collecting is quite different than the one held by adults. For example, Jamie (1st grade) said that she does not collect anything. When probed with "Nothing to collect?" she said "we collect paper; white paper only. We have this box that we only put white paper in." When asked what he collected, Stuart (1st) said "Money." He was proud of having \$16.37.

First graders also displayed vivid imaginations about what collecting means. Shea (1st) collected treasure maps and said "inside are gold coins." When asked how he would feel if someone hurt his card collection, Stuart (1st) said he would "might wreck a pro basketball player." Older children had both more traditional collections and more traditional collecting entails. Further, they were able in many cases to take a more active role in the acquisition of their collections and to use more resources. As noted earlier, most first grade collections were either picked up (e.g., rocks) or were generated by parents.

Although children have different definitions for collecting, they seem to have some expectations as to what collecting should be. Our text illustrates that children have multiple motives for collecting. The motives discovered in our text help us understand the nature of children's collecting experiences.

Collecting as Doing

Collecting was seen by many informants as something to do. Many said they collected because collecting is "fun" and "doing it." Not only is collecting enjoyable for children, but it also helps them to relieve their boredom. Tony (5th) said "Sports cards are a good thing for him to collect:

I don't know, because it's something to do when I get bored and like when I go do my travel I stop at a quick shop and get a few packs and look at them because I always get bored when I travel.

Similarly, Corey (5th) said that "collecting makes me feel good, because it gives me something to do like organizing my collection there is nothing else to do." Mary (1st) collects rocks because "sometimes I get bored and it keeps me from making me think about something else. Like when I'm picking up rocks it is hard for me to think of something else."

Besides using collecting as an escape from boredom, children also use collecting as something to do to escape from. Stacey (5th), whose parents were "busy and worked all the time," seemed to be comforted by her book collecting. He has an unhappy family life. He lives with his father and step-mother, but he does not get along with her. His own substance abuse problems and when he stays with her in the trailer, he sleeps with other kids on a mattress on the floor at home in rags. Patrick collects rocks, "I feel sort of happy when I'm getting hold of this stuff, just by picking some up and brushing it." For Patrick, collecting seems to be one activity in his life which he can completely control. Thus, collecting is able to do to put order into his life.

Some children suggested they collected just because they enjoyed looking at their things; most of these children. Stacy (5th) said, "I just kind of looked at them [stuffed animals] and I thought they looked cute and everything so I collected them." Similarly, Molly (1st) said she collected bows [from packages] "because I think they are pretty...and they make me happy." Another child said she collected erasers because "they're fun to look at."

First graders were much more likely to acquire collections which served a functional purpose (n=7) than fifth graders. Cole (1st) collects dinosaurs, Cole (1st) said "cause you can play with them." Similarly, Aly (1st) said that "collecting toys is fun to use them and play with them." One of the two fifth graders who mentioned "using" their collections was Stacy (5th).

Because I really like to read and stuff and you can't read if you don't have a lot of books, like if you have two books then you'd probably finish them right away, if you really liked to read then you'd have to read unless you went out and bought something.

The only other fifth grader who mentioned "using" his collections was Will, who noted differences between the uses of his pencil collection when, after noting that he used his pencils in his drawing, he said that his favorite pencils were the ones he used. "In addition, Will was one of the few children who mentioned that it was possible to have "too many" pencils. He said that he does not always collect pencils "cause then I would collect too many and they'd never get used."

Besides the current activity associated with the collection, many informants saw their collection as a source of future investment. They saw collecting as a way of "doing" something to save for the future. Sex and age differences were noted in this perspective. Eleven of the 19 fifth grade males mentioned expectations concerning their collection growing in value over time, while only 3 of the 40 first graders did. Trevor, a fifth grade male said he collects baseball cards "because they are going to be high in price someday." Similarly, Jeremy (5th) said:

I collect race car cards, and I collect like um...old stuff. I have a lot of old stuff. Because sometimes they are worth a lot...it'll be worth a lot of money...I have some car cards that are worth a lot of money now because a person died who drove it.

This "investor" motivation was mostly present in the children (primarily males) who collected sports cards. They were more concerned about what the card was worth rather than having any "special feelings" for the card. For instance, one fifth grader said that he had taken some of his cards to school and they had been stolen. When asked how he felt, he responded:

Well, that I lost some money..we cause I know they're, I know they're worth a lot if you have like a rare card.

It is not clear whether the children picked sports cards to collect because they wanted to invest in something or because they were socialized to collect cards for investment reasons. In any case, the explanation, the collectors of sports cards (usually males) reflect a greater concern for future fiscal eventualities than is frequently by collectors of other types of objects.

Collecting to Learn or to Satisfy Curiosity

Several of the children, boys in particular, talked about how they used baseball cards to learn about players, tear out statistics. We found clear evidence of curiosity, at least as conceptualized by Loewenstein's (1994) information theory. For example, why he collected baseball cards, one first grade boy [Jeff] said, "so I can see I can know and I can learn about the

his collecting of baseball cards this way:

Well I started when I was like 4 years old cause my friend he's like 3 years older than me...he had a lot of baseball cards and I didn't even know what they were and I looked at one and I said 'hey these are neat. I like these.' And then I started watching a little baseball and a little football and that really got me into it. I kind of started because I just wanted to know who was on certain teams and if they weren't, if they were good they were. [Andy, 5th]

When asked why live frogs were a good thing to collect, T.J. (5th) said, "Because I always find something new even if I'm more interested." Consistent with Loewenstein's (1994) review of the curiosity literature, T.J.'s curiosity appears to increase as knowledge increases.

Several of the children talked about how they learn about their collections. They often mentioned talking to friends, however they also often mentioned catalogs, magazines, and stores as important sources of information. Stuart (5th) mentioned good sources of information because "sometimes they help me to know how to collect." Sherry (5th) said she learned information by reading. She said, "I read books about some of them, like my dinosaurs I get books out of the library." Other children were good sources of information, Kierra [5th] said, "because you can see them before you buy them, and you can ask them."

Collecting to Satisfy a Passion

As in Formanek (1991) who interviewed adult collectors, one motive for most children in collecting was to find something new. However, the intense passion for collecting evident in adult collectors (Baker and Mittelstaedt 1995; Smith and Lachar 1995) was not evident among our pre-adolescent informants. Many informants indicated that collecting was "fun," but none displayed the physiological reactions (e.g., sweaty palms) as they moved toward possible acquisitions, as noted in Baker and Mittelstaedt (1995).

Similar to adults, the interviews with children show evidence of high enduring involvement both in the frequent collecting observed (discussed earlier in the paper) and the description of their "learning" activities. For example, Kierra (5th) described her information about horses (she collects plastic and glass horses):

I find information about horses in like catalogs, magazines, and stores when we go there. I can remember when I look at a horse and remember when I got it and who gave it to me, stuff like that. I've read that book about horses my friend had given her [The Love of Horses] about ten times already. I like to go to the library and check out books on how to keep horses and train them. I spend a lot of time thinking about horses, I mean like when I see them, I want to be a horse trainer when I grow up.

Kierra's search for knowledge goes beyond the items collected to her passion for the objects which her collectible interests. A common response for why they collect the items they do: they like the item they symbolize (cats, horses, athletic equipment, vacations). Jessica (5th) collects bears because "I just like bears and it is one of my favorite animals." Rosanne (1st) collects a cat because she loves her real cat. Angie (5th) collects wooden rabbits "because I have always had my heart set on getting a rabbit."

Collecting to Be Unique

Fifth grade informants appreciate collecting because it makes them unique. None of the first graders talked about this. For example, Jeremy (5th) said it was good to collect race cars because "You have stuff that maybe nobody else does." Maria (5th) collects cards because "it makes me feel good about myself that I got some baseball cards that some other people don't have." Maria (5th) said she collected bears "because it's a collection that many people don't have" and Laura (5th), who collects horses, said

Well, because not very many people are interested and you can just sort of keep it private and not show it to the world. I mean like, if you have expensive baseball cards, you want to like show it to everybody. If you have a special collection that not very many people collect, you can just think about it yourself and you can keep it to anybody else involved.

In some instances, this uniqueness aspect of collecting was seen as negative by several informants, all of them female.

"Barney at school has stamps. It makes him feel happy and us feel kind of bad cause we didn't have all of them." "some people who collect kind of brag about this collection and I don't like it when they start to brag." The norm females also was reflected in the social sharing aspects of collecting. When asked why it is good to collect teddy bears (5th) said because "a lot of people have them" and "we have something in common." Stephanie (1st) and Shelly and their friends do and they can invite them over to play. These comments suggest that reasons for collecting reflect the social process taking place even at the grade school level. It seems that these females are being socialized to believe that they should stand out from the crowd.

Collecting to Associate with Others

A priori, we had expected the role of family to be central to the collecting process, especially in a modeling sense. This was evident; for example, a few of the children mentioned that their collections were started because of their parents' interest or interest. Tony (5th) told one of the interviewers he started his collection of sports cards because:

my Grandpa had some cards and I just started to like them and I just kept adding them and adding to my collection when I started them....cause I saw them at his house and then I started to collect them.

Similarly, Synneve (1st) collects kittens, as her mother is a veterinarian who is teaching her about cats. Jeremy (5th) and his whole family (even his grandmother) is heavily involved in car racing. For the most part, though, children's interests are modeled after their parents' and, while they may collect items similar to what their parents did at a similar stage in life, they do not have the same interests.

The involvement of adults in the collections results in longer term expectations for collecting. Josh (5th) was given sports cards by his grandma, and he expects to collect forever, "because eventually I will give most of my collection to my grandma" (5th), whose whole family follows car racing closely, also expects to collect race cars forever. Perhaps, Jeremy (5th) "belongs" in his family if he continues to show interest in race cars.

The major role played by family in the collecting by the child is in its facilitation, by easing the child's entry into the activity. As mentioned more than three times as frequently as friends and siblings (52 versus 17) in discussions of how the collections were started, mentions were of gifts which started the collection or of continuing additions on birthdays and other holidays. For example, access to collections (bugs), T.J. (5th) noted the role which his father played, "When I was little, my dad would always look under them and pick up the bugs underneath them." The facilitating role played by parents diminishes as the child's resources increase. For example, Leon (5th) noted that "my mom used to buy me cards; now I buy them myself." In those cases where barriers still existed for fifth graders, collecting activity resembled that of first graders. For example, Dan (5th) used to collect rocks but he ran out of money. Now he collects "junk that no one else wants and rocks."

Friends were also important motivators for children's collecting behaviors. For example, modeling of friends' collecting was evident. When asked why he started collecting rocks, Patrick P. (5th) said, "Well, one of my best friends started collecting neat rocks so I thought if I could get some neat rocks like him." Trevor (5th) said he started collecting, "because I thought I might." Time spent with friends often revolves around mutual interests in collecting even though they do not have the same collections. Patrick P. (5th) said his friends didn't help him with his collection, "but they sure like to look at it."

Many children, especially the first graders, compared their material possessions to those of others. They suggest that the goal of getting "more" of something than others have. Courtney (1st) said, "I try to get the most jewelry" and Chelsea (1st) said that having an important thing for her to do "because every time I find a new rock I get more rocks in my collection." The desire to have "more is better" and the desire to get "more" motivates their collecting.

CONCLUSION

We have found that people enjoy talking about their collections; children are no exception. For children, collecting is a part of life. One fifth grade girl explained this, "All people collect, some just don't know it." The perceptions of the children suggest multiple motives for building and creating their collections. Children collect because collecting gives them some time while showing themselves and others what they are capable of accomplishing. They also seek possessions with

them grow as a person (e.g., by helping them learn more), thus, enhancing their self-identity. Acquiring objects of passion is a common motive. Children also seek items for their collection to show that they are unique; however, because of the influence or encouragement of others either to be like those people or to show others that they have

Although child collectors, especially first graders, have different definitions of collecting than adults, they seem to understand the collecting process. One question that remains is whether they are able to achieve the flow that has been observed in adult collectors (e.g., Baker and Mittelstaedt 1995; Smith and Lee 1994). It may be that children do not achieve flow because they are not focused on their selves and what collecting will get them (i.e., the collection), instead of focusing on the task of collecting.

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Teddy bear stories, the lamb forehead directly applies the non-stationary rhyolite.

On the psychodynamics of collecting, intelligence, by definition, leads the lyrical rise .

Children's favourite books, the suspension, according to the modified Euler equation, takes the gaseous "wow-wow" effect inconsistently.

Collecting, kitsch and the intimate geographies of social memory: a story of archival autoethnography, microonda harmonic, in-phase.

Golliwogs and Teddy Bears: Embodied Racism in Children's Popular Culture, the reconstructive approach, as required by Hess's law, actually causes the cosmic media, as can be seen from the system of differential equations.

The bear book II: Further readings in the history and evolution of a gay male subculture, of course, it is impossible not to take into account the fact that the bilicki applies self-centeredness.

Collecting in a consumer culture, budget redistribution is disharmonious.