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Collecting as Routine Human Behavior: Personal Identity and Control in the Material and Digital World

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Abstract: The human desire to collect objects is long recognized in historical and cultural studies where emphasis has been placed on memory institutions and their role in public life. Individual collecting, however, has been addressed primarily through the lens of wealthy obsessives or hoarders. Yet between these extremes, an interdisciplinary research literature has emerged since the late decades of the twentieth century that moves our understanding and focus from the psychoanalytic study of inner drives to the empirical study of objects in identity presentation and group membership. The normalization of collecting as a human activity offers a richer understanding of our relationship to objects through time and can accommodate the emergence of digital collectibles in contemporary studies. A model of collecting is presented that treats the collecting process as normal, extended, and representative of an individual's lived experience.

Keywords: collecting, presentation of self, digital collectibles, information behavior

Hunting-gathering is considered an early adaptation of humans to the world and for the majority of our species' history is how humans existed. Over time, the gradual shift from hunting and scavenging to a more pastoral, agricultural existence and from there to a competing urban, industrial model has marked the sweep of global progress.¹ A constant throughout has been the human desire to acquire and control resources. At a fundamental level, gathering or collecting objects of all kinds is part of human psychology, but our understanding of this in a theoretical and scholarly sense remains limited.

Great collections of objects have marked societies for millennia. From the loot of war to the crown jewels of monarchs, material possessions