# **Popular Culture Collecting: A Common Phenomenon among Fans**

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Abstract: Collecting is a way of expressing individuality and seeking satisfaction, and has significant significance in human culture. By collecting and accumulating specific items or information, people can showcase their interests, aesthetics, and knowledge levels, while also gaining psychological satisfaction and sense of achievement. For fans, collecting items related to their favourite characters or works is also a common behavior, which can showcase their support and love for their idols. Collecting allows fans to showcase their interests and hobbies, and share their preferences and emotions with others. This behavior not only represents fans' support and love for idols, but also reflects a cultural phenomenon.

*Keywords:* Collecting, Collection Motivation, Culture Collecting, Popular Collecting, Fan collection, Fan Cultures

#### 1. Introduction

Collecting seems to have become a common phenomenon, with many people tending to collect things. The collection is extensive, with about a third of adults doing it (Pearce, 1998)<sup>[1]</sup>. It is not unusual or esoteric; on the contrary, it is more related to other everyday practices and experiences, such as shopping and consuming (Pearce, 1998; Belk, 1995)<sup>[1][2]</sup>. Although this is not a recent phenomenon, there has been a recent increase in the number of people taking part in collecting, as well as in the range of items being preserved and the trend in the prices people pay for them (Belk, 1997)<sup>[3]</sup>. Nowadays, the collection of popular culture has never been as popular as it is now. It can be expected that in the places and times where consumerism prevails, collecting will develop and flourish (Belk, 2001)<sup>[4]</sup>. As more and more things are created, the media landscape is constantly evolving and everything becomes collectible (Geraghty, 2014)<sup>[5]</sup>.In fact, collecting items around popular culture characters has always been fairly common among fans.

McIntosh and Sghmeichel (2004) define a collector as a group of people who are motivated to collect a set of objects<sup>[6]</sup>. The utility functions of these objects are secondary or irrelevant to them. In addition, they do not intend to deal with these objects immediately (McIntosh and Sghmeichel, 2004)<sup>[6]</sup>. A fan, sometimes called a lover or supporter, is someone who is actively committed to supporting someone or something. They can express their enthusiasm in various ways, such as by collecting items related to their idols. As a result, the collection behavior of fans or their collections are common examples. Obviously, fans collect things for different reasons and in different ways. The way of collecting and the choice of objects are the important indexes reflecting the mental dynamics of collectors' subconscious, which provide an opportunity to describe the structure level of collectors (Subkowski,2006)<sup>[7]</sup>. Why do fans collect things, like most complex human social behaviours, the motivation behind the collection is obviously complex and multifaceted (McKinley,2005)<sup>[8]</sup>. Although researching fans' culture is a thriving area of academic exploration, there is less focus on collecting and fans collection practices (Hills,2003)<sup>[9]</sup>. Fans collecting is not a simple behaviour, it is likely to provide some insight into the study of social behaviour. The purpose of this paper is to describe the motivation behind the collection of fans by drawing on existing social psychology thoughts and research, as well as existing behavioural collectors' research and collections.

Collecting usually refers to the act of collecting various things or information, which can be divided into different categories according to their nature. It is an activity that generates knowledge, preserves fragile objects, and provides a richer sense of history (Belk,1998)<sup>[10]</sup>. Sometimes, collecting can be seen as a basic impulse or instinct that belongs to human (sometimes animal) activities (Macdonald,2011)<sup>[11]</sup>. Some people argue that the origin of the collecting is derived from the animal's instinct to hoard food and the materials necessary for survival (James,1890)<sup>[12]</sup>. For humans, this desire encourages people to

seek and hoard items of interest. However, in contemporary society, collecting can be regarded as a kind of consumption, which endows it with the legitimacy of consumption and material (Belk ,2001)<sup>[4]</sup>. Belk (2001) argued that this is a process of the individual's permanent pursuit of unnecessary luxuries and a continuous plan for self-improvement<sup>[4]</sup>. He tried to refine and emphasize a range of concepts related to collecting as a form of consumption, including possession as an indicator of success, honing discernment skills, the thrill of hunting, and the emotional complex of guilt and emotion generated in the acquisition of material objects (Macdonald,2011)<sup>[11]</sup>. On the other hand, Martin (1999) believes that collecting can be regarded as a kind of "disguise" and a form of denial to some extent<sup>[13]</sup>. These collectors attempt to cope with the uncertainty of the future by associating their collections with happy times in the past (Martin,2001)<sup>[14]</sup>. Collecting can provide some comfort when people's anxiety intensifies.

#### 2. Literature review

There is a lot of literature on collecting, including the history and culture of collecting, including biographies of individual collectors and books in specific collections, as well as anthropology, psychology and sociology in museums and popular collections. Collecting is a manifestation of the relationship between people and things in a certain form: a special method for the material world and the social world (Macdonald, 2011)<sup>[11]</sup>. Therefore, in the process of understanding it, other types of people and things need to be combined. Research on personal collection practices also involves differences between individuals, including why some people become collectors. One of the most common attempts to explain the differences between individuals is a loose psychoanalytic perspective that collecting can be seen as the outcomes of childhood experiences, especially a sexual experience or depression, as an expression of sublimation needs or pathology (Macdonald, 2011) [11]. This type of discussion is more about the moral evaluation of the collecting. While Forrester (1994) provides a broader explanation by creating a new, permanent world collection of these objects as a place for personal memory and the past<sup>[15]</sup>. This is a multifaceted narrative that avoids reducing the collection to motivation or reasons, although much of the discussion in Forrester can be roughly described as associating collection with identity(Macdonald, 2011)<sup>[11]</sup>. Baudrillard (2005) believes that people inevitably have to collect about themselves<sup>[16]</sup>. Collections can be seen as some clues about a person's personality because of their ability to express the power of a person's uniqueness (Macdonald, 2011)<sup>[11]</sup>. In other words, collecting may reveal the collector's identity. Collecting is a way of shaping and expressing oneself through material. The new social image of collectors may focus on reflecting relatively new ideas at the time, and personal identity can be reshaped in the process of collecting, rather than being given at birth (Forrester, 1994)<sup>[15]</sup>. In addition, owning a collection has become a symbol of status, injecting a new dynamic possibility into the existing social hierarchy: the relative quality of the collection itself becomes the basis for identifying and expressing social differences (King and ProQuest, 2008)<sup>[17]</sup>.

Belk and colleagues (1991) once asked some people what they would try to save in a fire<sup>[18]</sup>.Generally, individuals tend to take away some "special" items, including photos, souvenirs, heirlooms and valuables. Many of these items constitute a collection that is collected and kept purposefully and systematically (Belk, Wallendorf, Sherry and Holbrook, 1991)<sup>[18]</sup>. Unlike ordinary consumer objects, collections often have the same importance and characteristics as family members in some respects. People often collect items related to the past, especially those related to childhood, such as Barbie dolls, marbles and candy. These collections give people a chance to relive their childhood and connect themselves to the past (Rykwert,2001)<sup>[19]</sup>. The definition of contemporary consumer culture is "Fast Capitalism", where fast-paced life, the loss of innocence and the constant consumption of new products threaten the self (Geraghty,2014)<sup>[5]</sup>. Collections help them alleviate the insecurities and anxiety of losing themselves, allowing the memories of the past to continue into the present time (Rykwert, 2001)<sup>[19]</sup>. This is an example of the ultimate neurotic defense of reality (Baudrillard, 2005)<sup>[16]</sup>. Time passes in a terrifying, continuous, and irreversible manner, until a person inevitably passes away. The continuous accumulation of collections may be easily managed and controlled, thereby interrupting the passage of time (Baudrillard, 2005)<sup>[16]</sup>. In any form of collection, the collector uses an inanimate object to replace the relationship requirements (Subkowski,2006)<sup>[7]</sup>.

Meanwhile, such a collection can also point to a period of time that a person used to. For example, some men collecting rock music, toys, models, can be examples of contemporary nostalgia (Cross,2018)<sup>[20]</sup>. These collections are specific to a certain period of their growth, thus it is very likely that the memory will accompany the individual until adulthood. When people find that many frustrating and alienated things happen in their perishable cultures and outdated periods in commodities, people

will find that the pace of change is accelerating (Cross, 2018)<sup>[20]</sup>. Although some things or memories from childhood may seem unstable, as individuals age, their childhood experiences seem to become 'eternal' through collections. The importance of nostalgia in contemporary popular culture is likely to be highlighted by the return of classic movies, songs, games, and toys. At the heart of these products are childhood memories, whose rebirth has led to a growing adult fan culture(Geraghty,2014)<sup>[5]</sup>.

#### 3. Collecting: Connection and revisiting of memories

Collections are able to connect to the collectors' past experiences in some way (McIntosh and Schmeichel,2004)<sup>[4]</sup>. Therefore, collecting could be a way for many fans to relive their childhood. Some movie-related products have become iconic collections for fans to hark back to the past. For example, movie derivatives, from autographed stars to toys and other movie-related products, are very sought-after items that not only remind fans of the golden age of the movie but also may be the link to their past experiences. ThinkGeek is an American online retailer founded in 1999 that sells everything from clothing and electronics to toys and beverages, most of which are closely related to well-known films. It offers some merchandise for franchises of Star Wars, Star Trek, and Harry Potter, which are warmly welcomed by fans. These small items, toys, autographs, badges, models, comics, stickers, posters, etc. help fans celebrate a world that once existed in the real world, but also in the imagination of those who went to the movies when the movie was just getting started (Geraghty,2014)<sup>[5]</sup>. The Transformers series establishes the extent to which the role of adult collectors has influenced the continued popularity and longevity of children's toys and TV shows in the 1980s (Ibid)<sup>[5]</sup>. As the Transformers series and its associated branded products become part of a new form of cultural capital, Transformers experienced a general shift between children's television and adult television. Fans who played with these toys as children attempted to collect the original works (which are referred to as "first generation") and even search for replicas because they remember their love for the show and want to find a part of their childhood.

Memories of childhood could become the driving force of these Transformers fans trying to collect all the toys from the original to the present. This highlights the aging of the baby boomer generation by Noxon (2006)<sup>[21]</sup>. He saw adults who were obsessed with the appearance of youth, looking for nostalgic feelings by collecting vintage products and constantly trying to retain and regain youth (Noxon,2006)<sup>[21]</sup>. People use the past as a stage for self-identification and recall the moments of childhood by collecting and preserving things(Geraghty,2014)<sup>[5]</sup>. Fans are looking for collections of familiar and inspiring things that bring nostalgic memories. Nostalgia through collections seems to be a means for generations of people to exchange their growing feelings and share different forms of popular cultural experience. These toys not only symbolize the past of childhood but also represent the popular cultural capital of contemporary fans. Popular culture and personal memory seem to be interrelated. Popular culture is based on popular memory and is made up of words, ideas, ideologies, and narratives over time. In essence, the memory of the masses has become the source of consensus and the cornerstone of the mainstream. The history of popular culture is constantly being rewritten and reevaluated, and a group of viewers wants to participate in and revisit that history in some way (Berry,2007; May 2009)<sup>[22][23]</sup>. While collecting is able to provide an opportunity for them to look back at history. Ownership of the collection is beneficial to the collector's sense of self as evidenced by personal history, past, and future (Belk,1995)<sup>[2]</sup>. Each collection obtained will be a memory reminder of how the collector gets the story of the item in the future (Ibid)<sup>[2]</sup>.

#### 4. Collecting: Builders of memory, identity, and narration

The physical objects in the collection help collectors express their self-identity. Memory is vital to the production of subjectivity. Therefore, the memory contained in toys, goods, and collectibles is a symbol of self and a sign of a fan's identity. Collecting is not about mourning the past, but about creating a reflective, tangible identity in the present that helps the collector form a visual and physical biography of himself (Boym,2001)<sup>[24]</sup>. Bal (1994) agrees with the former saying that nostalgia is not a loss, but rather a self-role, a celebration of historical texts, and personal history is reflected in the collection of popular culture<sup>[25]</sup>. Bal (1994) further suggested, collecting is a narrative form that presents and conveys a subjectively focused sequence of events by acquiring, classifying, and reordering items<sup>[25]</sup>. In the context of collecting as a narrative, fans have the opportunity to establish their identity. In fan research, there is a clear connection between the identity of the fan and the object, usually one reflects the other (Geraghty,2014)<sup>[5]</sup>. The formation of a fan collection is a symbolic

resource for a person to form identity and position in the modern world. In any sense, the process of self-integration into the main economic, social, and cultural aspects of industrial modernity is a mirror of consumption. Then, through the collection, a personalized description of the history belonging to the collector can be performed, that is, reflecting the self (Geraghty,2014)<sup>[5]</sup>. Fans bring their life background and inner world into their toys and products, which are also a reflection of themselves. The collection of fans can be seen as the formation of the self. Every piece of work that is collected by people conveys the meaning of personal and social history. They are expressive collectors, and their collection serves as a statement of who they are (McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004)<sup>[4]</sup>. When collectors have an impressive collector, they tend to imagine what they are like, and how this will enrich their identity as collectors.

During this process, collectors may perceive an "ideal collector self" (Ibid)<sup>[4]</sup>. The Otaku is the name of a part of people who have a strong interest or hobby in comics and animations since 1970 (Nakamori, 1983)<sup>[26]</sup>. It usually refers to people who are obsessed with a particular form of popular culture and are committed to a topic or hobby without leaving home. The Otaku, who have a keen interest in comics, may collect thousands of books and turn the walls of the bedroom into shelves to preserve their favorites. The figurine-collecting Otaku who focus on collecting figurines of their particular interests, usually anime or games. These enthusiasts can protect their collections if a protective display case or keep them in their original packaging. Makoto has a full-time job at an IT company. His hobby is collecting DVDs and figurines of anime. His preferred text can be purchased, traded, and collected in an unchanging format. "I bought a series of DVDs I have watched on TV because I want to keep them," Makoto said. "There are free recordings on the Internet, but buying DVDs shows the spirit of fans. I want to buy my favorite series of DVDs and put them on the shelf in my room. " Yanai has about 500 DVDs in his small apartment. In addition, he even bought a set of "rental showcases" seen in the Akihabara store to showcase his collection of figurines. Obtaining valuable collectibles not only means gaining ownership of the item, but also reducing anxiety, enhancing self-esteem and confidence, and thus approaching one's ideal self (McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004)<sup>[4]</sup>.

Makoto estimates that he spends 30,000 yen a month on the DVD and 50,000 yen on figurines. Due to the spirit of the fans, he does not mind spending money on these collections. Contemplation and a commitment to higher self-esteem help explain that collectors are often willing to pay a high price for the items they want. Most of the Otaku are tacitly alienated from the majority or mainstream cultural groups, which means they are often outsiders in society. In order to escape the situation of not being recognized by society, the Qtaku consume pop culture in an unexpected, compulsive way. Makoto rejects this stereotype and sees the apartment as the center of a particularly vibrant "Otaku" culture. Here, he can easily gain a sense of identity and belonging to himself. King and ProQuest (2008) believe this type of collector values his collection as a whole of order and aesthetic arrangements as an expression of his personality and values<sup>[17]</sup>. Yanai's collection activities are integrated into his social and professional life. When the self and the world are no longer entangled, collection often represents an attempt to find the self and the world (Geraghty,2014)<sup>[5]</sup>. It expresses a desire for completeness and a desire for a world that will be perfected through this series (Ibid)<sup>[5]</sup>. Although he still accepts consciously the limitations of his collection of items, acknowledging their shortcomings and omissions, he still loves these collections, which also indicates that he has accepted his own limitations.

#### 5. Collecting: Self expression and social connections

Collecting may create alienation from others (Belk,1995)<sup>[2]</sup>, but it is not necessarily an obstacle to contact with the outside world. It seems to satisfy both individual needs and social group needs (McIntosh and Sghmeichel, 2004)<sup>[6]</sup>. The accumulation of collectibles is not only a symbol of economic status but also a close relationship between fans and their related fan groups (Geraghty,2014)<sup>[5]</sup>. Computer programmer and entrepreneur Mao called himself a full-time "Otaku". The price of Gundam robots I get from manufacturers ranges from 60,000 yen to 140,000 yen," said 35-year-old Mao, a collector who uses his designed platform to manage websites for fans. Mao said that the Otaku is "a person who is passionate about something and wants to share it with others", which means that there are many Otakus who like to socialize with others. Collecting can often be a shared interest among friends or an activity that brings people together. Whether it's discussing collections, trading items, or participating in collector events, collecting can create a sense of community and bring people closer together. On the website, he can discuss and share his favourite collections with other Otakus, which makes him feel meaningful and enjoyable. On the one hand, collecting can provide concrete evidence that a person is unique and autonomous (Danet and Katriel, 1989)<sup>[27]</sup>.

On the other hand, socializing with other collectors can also bring social fun and a sense of community. Some collectors often report that friendship with other collectors is one of the most valuable aspects of a collection (Christ,1965)<sup>[28]</sup>. Jenkins (2006) defines fan culture as the culture generated by fans and other amateurs through the underground economy, most of which comes from commercial culture<sup>[29]</sup>. Based on this, once fans start collecting, these items will become the focus of their discussion, and allow fans to socialize with each other (Geraghty,2014)<sup>[5]</sup>. At the Comic Convention, fans of all ages, nationalities and races, men and women, enjoy sharing and celebrating their favourite media or mass culture texts together. They are free to discuss and display their collections here. This may help provide a safe zone, a sanctuary where fear can be calmed and insecurity managed (Schwartz,1999)<sup>[30]</sup>, where they can meet, communicate, and in their daily lives outside their favourite world, they may not be able to enjoy positive news coverage or similar attractive Spaces (Geraghty,2014)<sup>[5]</sup>.

A pilgrimage to a shared meeting place is a limited journey of transformation aimed at finding community, that is, "public friendship" with other fans. The Comic Art Convention is an annual convention of comic book lovers and collectors in the United States. The convention provides space for exhibitors, including comic book dealers and collectors. Fans gather here to meet other fans, discuss their love for a work or series, and analyse their collections in complex debates about authenticity and subcultural capital. According to Fiske (1992), the convention provides a material space where cultural capital and economic capital meet<sup>[31]</sup>. Collecting provides a convenient place for collectors to be in the economic script of a culture. Such participation ensures that collectors are important members of popular cultural. The Convention Centre becomes an active and real fan space through nostalgia, collection and social interaction (Geraghty,2014)<sup>[5]</sup>. This is what the Comic Convention is all about: here people have the same passion, whether their obsessions are similar or very, very different, but come together. Therefore, this place is both an on-site event and a premeditated experience, representing the destination of fans and the journey of collectors. In this sense, fans attending this gathering are not only for collecting, but also to experience popular cultural atmosphere. This becomes a safe and familiar space for fans to celebrate themselves and interact with others, containing real objects from real places where fans can enter new worlds, meet new friends, and travel through different fictional spaces.

#### 6. Conclusions

Why do fans collect things? As mentioned above, some people collect to recall their childhood, some collect for themselves, and some collect to expand their social life and communicate with like-minded people. For many reasons, each collector has different motivations, but these motivations are not mutually exclusive. From the perspective of the collector's self-evaluation, collecting is almost always regarded as a positive thing in their lives (McKinley,2005)<sup>[8]</sup>. Collecting is a process of self-nostalgia and self-identity building. It also helps foster a sense of belonging, as fans also get involved in gathering and sharing about collecting. The personal identity and social identity of collectors can be expressed in many ways. King and ProQuest (2008) believe that collecting benefits for the objectified self is mainly reflected in the following three aspects<sup>[17]</sup>. Collections do this first by demonstrating the power of their collectors, the vital erotic energy, and the status within the social hierarchy. Secondly, by focusing on the past and present, memories and souvenirs, as well as signposts of future goals, objects reveal the continuity of collectors' selves in time. Thirdly, objects, as symbols of valued relationships (literally connected together), provide concrete evidence of a person's place in a social network (King and ProQuest, 2008)<sup>[17]</sup>.

However, sometimes the act of collecting is not pleasant. Freud (1914) assumes that all collecting is related to toilet training<sup>[32]</sup>. He believes that losing control and falling into the toilet is a traumatic event, so collectors not only want to get back control, but also want to retrieve what they lost years ago (Freud,1914)<sup>[32]</sup>. His explanation is a good illustration of the dark side of collecting. Hoarding is pathological because it interferes with normal daily life (McKinley,2005)<sup>[8]</sup>. When collecting becomes hoarding, it also becomes pathological. Perhaps this is the most extreme example of collecting. After all, there is a difference between collecting and hoarding. Despite the "dark side" of collecting, collecting is still mostly about positive emotions.

Fans collect in the context of the personal meaning they bring to the objects that make up their collections. Collecting is a complex activity that requires a set of behaviours, presented in a hypothetical order, that help us describe the collection behaviour and the motivations behind these different aspects (McIntosh and Sghmeichel, 2004)<sup>[6]</sup>. For those fans of the collection, the motivation

for their collection is often not money, but emotion. These collections allow them to relive their childhood, find self-awareness and integrate into the fan community. Based on this, they will continue to collect their favourite items, build a collection of objects and memories, and show what it means to be a fan.

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