

## Exploring worldwide collecting consumption behaviors

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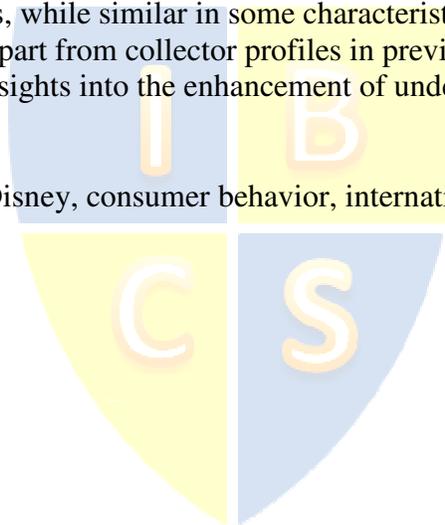
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### ABSTRACT

The appeal of collecting and accumulating objects to display, trade, or sell is a unique but common form of consumption behavior throughout the world. This exploratory research develops a perspective on this consumption behavior by studying Disney pin collectors. The preliminary findings indicate that Disney pin collectors, while similar in some characteristics to other collectors, exhibit some unique differences that set them apart from collector profiles in previous studies. The unique consumer behavior in this study will give insights into the enhancement of understanding of this international phenomenon.

Key words: collecting, trading, Disney, consumer behavior, international marketing



## INTRODUCTION

Considered to be “an intensively involving form of consumption” (Belk 1995, p. 67), collecting is an important part of many people’s lives. The type of object that becomes a collectable is almost limitless constrained only by the variety of that product that is produced. Collecting ranges from the more traditional forms such as baseball cards, coins, dolls, guns, art, and antiques among others to the less traditional such as fishing lures, spoons, watches, and the list goes on.

In fact, in recent years, an increasing number of brands have been purchased for collection rather than consumption, turning collecting into a form of buyer behavior focused on the acquisition and possession of a brand (Slater 2000). Whenever objects that are collected relate to a brand, the sense of ownership enabled and endorsed by the collecting activity transforms into brand ownership. Thus, collecting, particularly of objects denoting a brand, is relatively unexplored and constitutes a field of research with underestimated potential and high marketing relevance.

One group of collectors representing a distinct brand that has grown significantly since 1999, are those who collect Disney pins. This international group of collectors purchase and often trade the thousands of Disney pins that have been created and are still being created on a weekly basis. Collecting Disney pins offers people a unique opportunity to collect an item that is available at the Disney theme parks in the United States (California and Florida), France (Paris), Hong Kong, and Japan (Tokyo) where people can combine their collecting and trading with their vacation.

The purpose of this study is to explore the characteristics that define Disney pin collectors and traders to determine what they have in common with other collectors and what makes them unique. First, we examine the way collecting has been defined and the background on collecting behavior. Based on observational and survey data, the profile of Disney pin collectors are examined in light of typical collectors. Finally, a discussion and future research are provided.

## UNDERSTANDING COLLECTING

### Defining Collecting

Specifying as precisely as possible what collecting means is a twofold task. First, collecting should be distinguished from consumption processes that tend to be falsely used in a synonymous manner. Prior research supports our view that collecting is not the same as accumulating, possessing, hoarding, or investing. While an accumulator can be just as acquisitive as a collector, an accumulator is not selective enough to be a collector (Kron 1983) and is typically not proud but rather ashamed of the multitude of objects he or she possesses (Phillips 1962). Also, in contrast to a coin collector, for example, a miser is an accumulator by viewing money as a commodity (Belk 1995; Simmel 1907). While a possessor can be just as interested in ownership as a collector, a possessor may have not acquired the objects by him- or herself. A more important distinction between collecting and possessing is that unlike mere possessing, the collecting activity includes the order and organization of the objects and the possibility of completion as critical components (Pearce 1994, 1998). While a hoarder shares with a collector the drive to possess, objects consumers hoard (e.g., fuel or toilet paper) are typically identical (Belk 1995). In addition, unlike a collector, a hoarder primarily views objects as utilitarian commodities (Belk 1995). While an investor may spend as much time as a collector on hunting for and acquiring valuable objects, the main intentions of “a true collector” (Belk 1995, p. 94) are not profit-based. For instance, to a coin collector, acquiring coins for investment purposes is only of secondary interest, if of any at all. Overall, collecting sets itself apart from any consumption activity through its

focus on forming a set of objects (i.e., the collection) and its complete lack of focus on the objects' intended use (Belk 1995).

Second, specifying the meaning of collecting should additionally benefit from revisiting prior definitions of collecting. One of the earliest definitions was provided in 1932 by Durost: "A collection is basically determined by the nature of the *value* assigned to the objects, or ideas possessed. If the *predominant* value of an object or idea for the person possessing it is intrinsic, i.e., if it is valued primarily for use, or purpose, or aesthetically pleasing quality, or other value inherent in the object or accruing to it by whatever circumstance of custom, training, or habit, it is not a collection. If the predominant value is representative or representational, i.e., if said object or idea is valued chiefly for the relation it bears to some other object or idea, or objects, or ideas, such as being one of a series, part of a whole, a specimen of a class, then it is the subject of a collection" (p. 10). Durost's definition contains the important distinction between a noncollector's appreciation of objects for being usable and a collector's appreciation of objects for being part of a class or set. Introducing the subjective perspective of a collector as a crucial component of collecting, Alsop (1982) suggests, "To collect is to gather objects belonging to a particular category the collector happens to fancy ... and a collection is what has been gathered" (p. 70). Accordingly, a collection is what a collector believes it is (Pearce 1994b). Aristides (1988) emphasizes the distinction between collecting and possessing by offering the following definition: "Collection is 'obsession organised.' One of the distinctions between possessing and collecting is that the latter implies order, system, perhaps completion. The collector's interest is not bounded by the intrinsic worth of the objects of his desire; whatever they cost, he must have them" (p. 330). Adopting the idea of the interrelated set (Durost 1932) and expanding it by the aspect that the collection as an entity is larger than the sum of its parts (Pearce 1994b), Belk et al. (1991) define collecting as "the selective, active, and longitudinal acquisition, possession and disposition of an interrelated set of differentiated objects (material things, ideas, beings or experiences) that contribute to and derive extraordinary meaning from the entity (the collection) that this set is perceived to constitute" (p. 8). Muensterberger (1994) defines "collecting simply as the selecting, gathering, and keeping of objects of subjective value" (p. 4). This definition deserves merit for being to the point while still covering most unique characteristics of collecting. Still, collectors' passion, lacking care for the products' original use, and strong tendency to follow the "no two alike" rule (Danet and Katriel 1988) are critical dimensions on which Muensterberger's definition falls short. Therefore, we consider the following definition to be the most comprehensive compromise thus far: "Collecting is 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. 67).

## Demographics of Collectors

Having reviewed, compared, and summarized definitions of collecting, we proceed by taking a closer look at the demographic profile of the collector. It has been argued that because the drive to hunt, acquire, and own objects is a common trait all humans share, everyone is a potential collector (Olmsted 1991). Still, while general statistics about the spread of collectors vary, several sources indicate that between a quarter and a third of all adults in Western countries define themselves as collectors (Belk 1988; Pearce 1995). It is likely that this figure continues to grow to around a half (Pearce 1998).

Age: Until twelve years of age, most children are collectors. Youthful collectors are often encouraged to start collecting by their parents (Belk et al. 1991) or by teachers who sponsor collecting clubs (Shutiak 1986). In general, prior studies (e.g., Danet and Katriel 1988) suggest that collecting is more widespread among children than among adults. The reasons for which many adolescents stop

collecting and only few adults return to this activity were found to be threefold: the fear to be considered by others to engage in a childish hobby (e.g., Kozden 1989), the lack of time, and the increased number of alternative possibilities for achieving a sense of expertise as an individual (Belk et al. 1991). Still, previous findings indicate that collections are often continuously maintained and developed throughout a lifetime (e.g., Dannefer 1981) or are even taken care of more diligently upon retirement (Dannefer 1981). Likewise, it has been argued that older and retired collectors may have an advantage over younger collectors by having more time for their hobby and for developing and refining their collecting-related expertise over the years.

**Gender:** Among very young collectors, there are just as many girls who collect as there are boys. During adolescence, however, the activity drastically declines, especially for girls (Belk 1995; Olmsted 1991). Also, it is more men than women who tend to pick up collecting again in middle age (Ackerman 1990) or begin taking the hobby more seriously from then on (Dannefer 1981). Traditionally, the economic requirements and the competitive dimension of collecting have attracted more men (Rigby and Rigby 1944). In addition, Baekeland (1981) argues that collecting may be one of the few activities that enable men to be both expressive and aggressive or competitive. Nonetheless, there are also many women who collect. For example, about 41 percent of coin collectors and 49 percent of stamp collectors are women (Crispell 1988). In addition, as Baekeland (1981) points out, “we rarely think of accumulations of dresses, shoes, perfumes, china and the like as collections” (p. 47). Hence, it is quite thinkable that while women have collected objects other than typical collectors’ items, such as stamps or art, their collections have never been perceived that way. In fact, prior research indicates that there are gender differences in terms of what men and women collect. For instance, most collectors of instant collectables (i.e., items that have been produced for collecting purposes in the first place) tend to be women (Crispell 1988). Belk and Wallendorf (1994) found that while men are more likely to collect books or sports-related items, women are more likely to collect jewelry or housewares. After all, the difficulty to identify a clear gender dominance may result from the fact that typical collector traits include both “masculine” (i.e., aggressive, competitive) and “feminine” (i.e., preservative, nurturing) (Belk and Wallendorf 1994).

**Social class:** As with gender, there also seem to be social-class differences in what is collected (Belk 1995). By means of a survey, an American collecting magazine found that the median income of the participating subscribers was about 30 percent higher than the U.S. population median and that 70 percent of them had white-collar jobs (Treas and Brannen 1976). Indeed, prior research suggests that both income and culture determine how common collections of certain objects are within respective social classes. For instance, while collecting fine art seems to be particularly practiced in higher social classes (Marquis 1991) and collecting visual art is preferred by the upper-middle class (Rochberg-Halton 1979), collecting tattoos is often considered as a symbol of a lower social status (Belk 1995). With regard to baseball cards (Bloom 1989), beer cans and related items (Soroka 1988), stamps (Bryant 1982), instant collectables (Roberts 1990), and most collecting areas other than fine art (Belk et al. 1991), the middle classes make up the biggest proportions of collectors. In fact, it is only the lowest-income segments that are typically excluded from collecting. Other than that, collectors can be found from all social classes. As with age, people with more disposable money have an advantage in more likely being able to afford the rarest and most sought-after collector’s item. However, the expertise, persistence, time, and even luck of less wealthy collectors can compensate to a certain extent (Belk 1995).

## **International Collecting**

In general, international collectors are interested in a wide range of collectable goods. Antique map collectors around the globe seek collectables to satisfy their curiosity by discovering the geographic impact of the great explorers, or learning of the evolution of man's conception of the cosmos (Angustyn, Lan, Roy, Martayan, 2013). Stamp collectors in Europe tend to have specialized collections and communicate with other club members (Voss, 2008). Sneaker collectors from Czech Republic are influenced by the development of hip-pop and skater subculture (Čermáková, 2011). With a long history of a global consumer subculture, sneaker community has a fan base of more than 35,000 members globally (Čermáková, 2011). Most international collectors in Spain do not seek an economic profit from their collection (Alicia Blanco-González, 2006). On the other hand, international collectors are members of collecting clubs and seeking social profit from their hobby. For example, Olympic pin collectors around the globe usually belong to pin-collecting clubs and go to pin-collecting conventions (Belson, 2012).

### **Types of Collectors**

Among all collectors, four types have been identified: passionate collectors, inquisitive collectors, the hobbyist, and expressive collectors. Passionate collectors are likely to pay any price for the item they desire; in contrast to the basic definition of collecting, inquisitive collectors consider collecting to be an investment; the hobbyist collects primarily for the pleasure experienced; and expressive collectors see collecting as a form of self-expression, that is, as a statement of who they are (McIntosh and Schmeichel 2004; Saari 1997).

Danet and Katriel (1986) developed a more simplistic, yet equally useful typology of collectors. "Type A" collectors are more affective, as they seek to continuously improve their collections without feeling the need to complete a series of items. Thus, "Type A" collectors focus more on the artistic dimension of collecting. In contrast, "Type B" collectors are more cognitive in their approach, as they tend to select objects that add to an existing series and that assist in increasing knowledge as opposed to improving aesthetic aspects of the collection. Hence, "Type B" collectors place stronger emphasis on the scientific dimension of collecting, such as in terms of generating and disseminating knowledge relating to the objects collected. Both types have in common that their collections help legitimize what may otherwise be seen as unnecessary acquisitiveness (Belk 1995).

### **DISNEY PIN COLLECTING/TRADING**

Disney pin collecting is experienced by potentially a unique set of consumers. Disney pins are available for commercial purchase through Disney parks worldwide and online through Disney. New pins are released on a weekly basis, and often these pins are unique to each park around the world. Some pins are limited editions of anywhere between 50 and 1000 and are more highly valued by collectors because of their scarcity factor. Furthermore, some pins are not available for sale at all, and can only be obtained by trading an owned pin with a Disney cast member, attending a Disney Pin Convention or Pin Cruise, being selected to participate in a show, or winning a contest. Scarcity due to geographic location, condition of acquisition (e.g. cast member trade or special event), or limited edition status may change how collections are viewed.

Disneyland theme parks around the globe have different level of pin trading activities. Hong Kong Disneyland has its "Pin Trading Fun Day" every April (Disney Theme Park Merchandise, 2013). The 2013 Hong Kong event launched four new limited edition pins and pin sets, two new Hidden Mickey pin series and a Pin Trading Fun Days Exclusive Pin (Disney Theme Park Merchandise, 2013).

Disney Paris has its “Pin Trading Night” and a series of pin events through the month of May (Disney Paris). In 2013, from May 11 to the 25th, an array of special new pins has been released at Disneyland Paris (Disney Theme Park Merchandise, 2013).

On the other hand, although pin traders in Japan have a strong interest in purchasing and trading pins, Disneyland Tokyo has ceased cast member pin trading and pin events (Macdonald-Demosthenous, 2011). Because the concerns over the possibility that pins from Japan could be radioactive due to nuclear events in 2011, and the importance of how Japan is viewed in a world economy, the official pin trading activities have been curtailed, although a lively trade continues unofficially online (Macdonald-Demosthenous, 2011).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research team wished to investigate how Disney pin collectors might be similar or different than other collectors, as it was previously observed at an annual pin trading convention that Disney pin collecting behaviors and the collectors themselves may have unique aspects. To this end, a multiphase study was initiated with this paper representing the first two phases.

An initial orientation for the researchers took place at an annual Disney Pin convention at the MGM/Hollywood Studios at Walt Disney World, where the researchers immersed themselves in the activities of the convention and observed the behaviors of pin collectors from a strictly qualitative standpoint. After the convention, the researchers began studying pin collecting behaviors within and without the Disney parks, at public trading locations, with online pin trading sites, on pin trader blogs and discussion boards, and through the Disney PinCast (podcasting for pin traders). Following this background research, the team designed the next phase of research and returned to a later annual Disney Pin convention at EPCOT at Walt Disney World in Florida. Observation research was initially used (phase 1), and then the research team proceeded to talk to various collectors about their pin trading and recruit them for further phases of the research, which included an online survey (phase 2) as well as qualification for later qualitative in-depth interviews (phase 3).

### **Observations and Interactions**

At both pin conventions, researchers observed that convention attendees were almost entirely adults, although previous research (e.g. Danet and Katriel 1988, Kozden 1989) and the genre of the “childlike” Disney theme would suggest that more children would be involved. Additionally, there were equal counts of male and female registrants at both conventions, indicating that Disney pins are not gender specific, unlike previous research by Belk and Wallendorf (1994). It was, however, noted that most attendees were middle age, supporting Ackerman’s 1990 study. International collecting was a popular activity, and traders from Europe and Asia were mobbed with long lines of traders. Conversations in many languages were noted, and collectors from England, Germany, France, Belgium, Japan, China, Italy, Norway, and Belgium were interviewed.

### **Survey Research**

Fifty potential respondents were recruited at the second pin convention who agreed to participate in further phases of the study. For the next phase, these 50 respondents were emailed a link to an online survey to provide a profile of themselves. These respondents were also encouraged to forward the survey link to other potential respondents who were fellow pin collectors. Sixty eight valid responses

were received from 17 states and six countries (USA, Canada, England, Japan, France, and Germany). Respondents represented a variety of years of experience with Disney pin trading, with 12% informally trading years before Disney pin trading became official in 1999, 29% beginning trading within the last five years, and the remainder (and majority) having pin traded for about 15 years.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Demographics

Most (60%) respondents were female, likely reflecting that women are more likely to answer online surveys and surveys in general (Underwood et al., 2000; Pokela et al., 2004). In fact many respondents indicated in the comments area that they were responding for both themselves and a male spouse/significant partner. Respondents were highly educated, with 61% having a four-year college degree or higher. Most had white-collar employment (79%) and their employment and education status was reflected in 48% having annual incomes between \$50K-\$150K. Ninety percent were Caucasian, the remainder being Asian, Hispanic, and finally African American. These results are similar to those of Treas and Brannen (1976), indicating that someone with higher than average social class and socioeconomic status is more likely to collect.

Most respondents (62%) were married or living with a significant partner, and only 24% had children under 18 living in their household. These results reflect the middle-aged status (average age was 44, and ranged between 22 and 70). These results mirror Belk's (1995) findings that although collecting can go on throughout life, a focus on collections can take place in middle age once children have left the household.

### Collecting Behaviors

Unlike Belk (1995), who found many collectors engage in collecting individually, 36% of Disney pin respondents indicated they share the collecting/trading hobby with their spouse, and only 7% acted alone. The remaining group participated in the hobby with close friends and other family members (often elder parents or adult children), and indeed the social aspects of the Disney pin hobby was a predominant theme among respondents at both the conventions and on the survey in the comments area. Worldwide collectors particularly treasured their relationships established with international pin pals, with lifelong friendships being established, common vacations taken, and children visiting each other's households across the globe.

One aspect that is unique to Disney pin collecting is the trading aspect. Many collectors consider themselves as traders (not collectors), and indeed, at a Disney Pin convention, buying and selling is prohibited – only trading is allowed. A common perception among this group is that buying pins to trade is acceptable behavior, but selling them is not. Even so, 17% of respondents admitted there were some business/selling aspects to their Disney hobby; the rest claimed it was only a hobby. Almost all respondents (98%) had a “pinpics” trading ID (an independently run website to database personal pin collections and trade pins), yet fewer had an eBay ID (62%) for buying and selling pins.

Previous studies (e.g. Belk 1995, Marquis 1991) indicate that collectors usually focus on a single item or theme within their collection. Disney pin collectors, on the other hand, reported less focus. The pinpics trading site has over 100 categories of Disney pins; our survey offered 15 of the most common categories (e.g. theme park, character, limited edition, event, international, holiday, artist proof, seasonal, movie, resort, commemorative, passholder). Almost all respondents checked all the

categories, and then wrote in voluminous comments on additional themes, categories, and pin types in the write-in field.

In the comments area, it became clear that Disney pin collectors share common traits with Coca-Cola collectors in their perceived relationship with the brand. Collectors of items relating to popular culture not only use the brand, but live with it every day, feeling that they own the brand (Slater 2000). Most respondents (71%) reported in the survey that they collected only Disney pins, with no other type of pin or collectible in their repertoire. Clearly, the group is quite loyal to the brand.

The size of the collections surprised the researchers, with the average collection size at 3,000 pins, and some respondents reporting collection sizes well in excess of 30,000 pins. These high collection sizes were also verified on the pinpics trading site. Even newer collectors had many hundreds of pins. Because “starter” pins can be bought for a few dollars, and rare limited-edition pins are valued at hundreds of dollars, it is difficult to estimate the value of collections, and the pins’ small physical size does not allow comparisons with collections of art or other larger, higher-value items. Respondents did report that they did spend money engaging in their hobby; not including the pins themselves (thinking only about pin accessories, pin-related travel, etc.), 30% of respondents spent over \$3,000 annually on their pin hobby.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

The first two phases of this study, as described above, provided background information on Disney pin collecting and a profile of the collectors/traders themselves. The research is limited to a more passionate collector with a high-involvement level in the hobby. However, more research is needed for the final phase to establish motivations for the collectors and their typologies. By definition, Disney pin collectors would be classified predominantly as “Type A” (Danet and Katriel, 1986) because Disney continues to release collectible pins each week; therefore, collections cannot ever be completed. However, the Type A/B classification may be too simplistic to describe this group of collectors. Further inquiry is needed to see if these collectors fit into the typologies of passionate collectors, inquisitive collectors, hobbyists, and expressive collectors (McIntosh and Schmeichel 2004; Saari 1997).

Additionally, there is a wide and varied body of research on collecting motivations. Research from the annual pin conventions, online sites, and write-in survey comments indicate a variety of motivations to collect Disney pins, from social aspects with friends and family bonding, to the “thrill of the hunt” and less savory aspects of “cheating” other people in a trade and getting the better of them. These motivations will be explored in the third phase of this research which includes in-depth qualitative interviews with these same pin collectors. It is hoped that by describing these Disney pin collecting/trading behaviors as well as delving into the motivations of the hobby, more insight can be gained into this unique consumer behavior.

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