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Materials Matter: An Exploration of the Curatorial Practices of Consumers as Collectors

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Running head: Materials matter: The curatorial practices of collectors

Structured Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the interplay between the curatorial practices of consumers as collectors and the materiality of the collected objects. In particular, this study explores how the material substances of collected objects shapes curatorial practices and how the ongoing use of the collected objects challenges curatorial practices.

Methodology/approach

Taking advantage of the publicization of once-private collections on social media, we collect 111 YouTube videos created by plastic shoe aficionados. Drawing from visual anthropology and theorizations of materiality, we analyze consumer interactions with the objects they collect.

Findings

This study's findings elucidate consumers' interactions with the material substances of the objects they collect and demonstrate how these interactions shape the ways in which consumers curate their collections, including how they wear, care for, catalog, and display the collected objects.

Research implications

Our findings have implications for theorization on consumer collections, consumer identity, and consumer participation in brand communities and are relevant for consumer researchers who study the interactions and relationships between consumers and consumption objects.

Originality/value of paper

This study is the first to re-examine consumers as collectors to extend and update consumer research on the curatorial practices of physical, wearable collectibles. This study sets the foundations for further research to advance our understanding of consumers as collectors as well as to illuminate other theories and aspects of consumer research that consider consumer-object interactions.

Keywords: *Collecting, curatorial practices, materiality, plastic, video analysis, material substances*

Classification: Research paper

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Introduction

Since Belk, Wallendorf, Sherry, Holbrook, and Robert's (1988) seminal study, a theory of collecting (Belk, Wallendorf, Sherry & Holbrook, 1991) has evolved to provide insights about the phenomenon of collecting, including the nature of collecting itself (Belk et al., 1988), meanings and motivations (Belk et al., 1991), problems and benefits (Belk, 1995a), gender and socioeconomic differences (Belk et al., 1991), children as collectors (Baker & Gentry, 1996), and collectors of specific objects such as shoes (Bose, Bruns, & Folse, 2009), natural history objects (Polites, 2009), and branded goods (Slater, 2000). Collecting has been defined as "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, 1995a, p. 479). To collect, consumers engage in a series of activities related to the acquisition, documentation, preservation, use, and disposal of the collected objects (Hohn, 2008) as well as the exhibition, interpretation, and dissemination of their collections (Graham & Cook, 2010). We refer to those activities as curatorial practices. Collection studies, a research field that focuses on museums and their collections, has called attention to the importance of understanding curatorial practices to better appreciate the importance of collections and the reasons behind their formation (Pearce, 1994, p. 194). Our review of the existing consumer literature shows that although a general theory of collecting may have been developed in the field, researchers have paid little attention to the curatorial practices of consumer as collectors. Importantly, the emergence of digital displays of collections facilitated by social media makes revisiting the area of consumers as collectors timely.

Despite this gap, the existing literature has revealed the several points about our current understanding of consumers as collectors and their collections. First, it is known that the types of objects collected are wide-ranging. They can be natural or human-produced, solid or liquid, physical or digital, inanimate or alive, minuscule or massive, fragile or durable, handmade or manufactured, scarce or mass-produced and widely available, and antique or newly created. However, once having decided on the type or form of a collection, collectors are usually selective (Belk et al., 1988), acquiring only a defined range of objects that fall within clear boundaries. Existing studies surrounding collectible objects in the context of consumption are largely associated with a materialistic lens; with suggestions that collected items are conspicuously accumulated (Rehak, 2014; Muensterberger, 1994). However, studies that emphasize the cumulative aspect of collections neglect the fact that consumers also interact with the “thingness” (Miller, 2005) of collected objects. For instance, prior research has not examined how consumers relate to the material substances that collected objects are made of, nor what curatorial practices are invoked by specific substances. For example, collections of objects made of glass or porcelain may require different settings (e.g., shelves, boxes, and spaces) and care compared to collections of objects made of paper, precious metals, fabric, or plastic.

Second, as noted by Pearce (1994, p. 194), forming a collection is “part of the relation between the subject, conceived as each individual human being, and the object, conceived as the whole world, material and otherwise, which lies outside him or her.” In this sense, collectors select objects from the material world, remove them from the original social categories in which they were included, and structure them in a different category of social practice; thereby curating a collection (Pearce, 1994). Collected objects are said to not be likely to ever see service in their original functional capacities, which are stripped away upon joining a collection (Belk, 1995a). However, objects within categories of collections, such as

shoes, clothing, fashion accessories, and other wearables, sometimes continue to be utilized for their original intended functional purpose (i.e., they are worn by their collectors) while being cherished as part of a collection at the same time. In other words, these types of collected objects are somewhat, but not completely, removed from their original functional capacities. How consumers as collectors relate to and curate their wearable collected objects remains unclear, and the implications of wear or use for consumers whose collected objects continue to serve their original functional capacity also requires further exploration.

To advance the understanding of the curatorial practices of consumers as collectors, we explore how the curatorial practices of consumers as collectors are shaped by the materiality of collectibles. We ask, “How do material elements of the collected object shape curatorial practices?” and “How does the ongoing use of the collected object challenge curatorial practices?” We address these research questions through a qualitative study of consumers, fans, and collectors of plastic shoes commercialized under the brand Melissa. Our dataset consists of video-based collection displays created and shared on YouTube by these consumers. We center our visual analysis on consumer interactions with the plastic shoes and on consumers’ verbal reflections about the material substances and functions of these collected objects. In addition to adding to the theorization of consumers as collectors, we discuss the implications of our findings for theories of consumer identity, brand communities, and other aspects of consumer–object interaction. Finally, we indicate avenues for future research on the materiality of consumer collections.

Collectors and Curatorial Practices

Nearly one in every three people in North America is a collector and willing to define themselves as such (Pearce, 1995). Historically speaking, the development of collecting coincides with the rise of consumer culture (Belk, 1995b). Collecting is a specialized form of consumer behavior that involves acquiring, using, and disposing of products. Collectors are

said to engage in 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” (Belk et al., 1991, p. 178).

Although a general theory of collecting has been developed through the work of Belk (1982, 1994, 1995a, 1995b) and Belk et al. (1988, 1991), there are surprisingly few subsequent studies that have explored the consumer collecting of products or brands (e.g., Baker & Gentry, 1996; Hughes & Hogg, 2006; Long & Schiffman, 1997; Martin & Baker, 1996; Slater, 2000, 2001). In particular, there is little research on the curatorial practices of consumers as collectors, i.e., how consumers assemble and manage their collections. Curatorial practices include the acquisition (gifts, loans, purchases or exchanges), documentation (categorization, labeling, and history), preservation (cleaning, restoring, and storing), and use of collections as well as exhibition, interpretation, and dissemination (ICOM, 2004). In the arts and museum studies, these curation practices have been diversely theorized based on the type of collection, object, and museum (Dudley, 2013). In consumer research, curatorial practices have not been sufficiently theorized in the context of collections, a few prior studies have looked at how consumers curate possessions (e.g., Csíkszentmihályi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; McCracken, 1986).

Discussions of how consumers acquire, clean, store, groom, and display consumption objects are found in several theoretical streams of consumer research (e.g., Coupland, 2005; Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2009; Fournier, 1998; Hill & Stamey, 1990; Richins, 1994a, 1994b; Tian & Belk, 2005). Some of this research focuses on how objects become meaningful possessions through these practices, emphasizing that possessions may be singularized, sacred, materialized, and loved, as consumers interact with them (e.g., Ahuvia, 2015; Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry, 1989; Epp & Price, 2010). For example, researchers have suggested

that consumers may build shrines or displays of objects they are devoted to and engage in rituals with these objects, such as caressing, polishing, cleaning, adjusting, and, if necessary, restoring them (Pichler & Hemetsberger, 2007, 2008; Pimentel & Reynolds, 2004). However, collecting and its associated rituals were not the focus of these studies, so they did not explore what types of objects formed a collection, the materials these collected objects were made of, or the curatorial practices involved in managing these objects. Therefore, the existing understanding of the rituals and practices that consumers engage in while managing their collections is superficial.

Although some consumer research has focused on how consumers care for, display, and dispose of the objects they personally wear (e.g., Albisson & Perera, 2009; Cherrier, 2009), wearable and consumable objects that form collections have received much less attention. Wearable collections, such as those of shoes, demand constant, diligent devotion from their curators. Shoes that are worn may become dirty or smelly, and their shape may be altered. Depending on the material they are made of and the occasions and locations of wear, shoes may also become stained, scratched, or broken. Prior research has noted that some consumable collectibles, such as beer and wine, are used up by collectors over time (Belk 1995b). However, it seems that these items are used or consumed only on special occasions. Such “non-ordinary use of the [collected items] keeps [the] consumable collection within the definition of collecting as involving, in part, removing things from ordinary use” (Belk, 1995b, p. 86). In other words, their non-ordinary use preserves these items’ characteristics as collectibles, because it means they are still partially removed from ordinary use. There remains much to be explored and uncovered in relation to the private rituals and practices that consumers engage in to maintain their collections of wearables and consumables.

Finally, a recent and interdisciplinary stream of research on digital collections has shown that digital technologies have transformed curatorial practices, facilitating or

complicating “meaningful practices of acquisition, curation, and exhibition” (Watkins, Sellen & Lindley, 2015, np). Once-private collections have been made public and shared with broader audiences via social media and organized around hashtags or the tagging of videos, images, and texts associated with a particular theme or interest-based collection (Geismar, 2013). Such sharing forms a key part of (digital) collecting (Belk, 2014), as it can help collectors to legitimize a collection when others recognize it as worthwhile (Belk, 1994; Belk & Wallendorf, 1994).

Personal collections also serve to shape the self-definitions of collectors (Belk et al., 1988); therefore, displaying collections to others is akin to displaying one’s self (Belk, 1995b, 2003; Watkins et al., 2015). On social media, physical collections are displayed to a broader audience than what used to be possible. Through digital displays, the public also gets to examine curatorial practices of other collectors (e.g., do the items appear clean and well cared for? Is the collection well organized?) and can also manifest their reactions and responses to these practices. Consequently, the implications of displaying a collection for collectors’ identity work are likely potentiated through digital technologies.

Materials Matter: An Extended View of Materiality

To explore how the curatorial practices of consumers as collectors are shaped by the materiality of collectibles, we draw upon recent theories of materiality that are grounded in the concept of objectification. Objectification is an ongoing process whereby the self is externalized while the object is re-contextualized and the resulting meanings are internalized by the subject and embodied by the object (Miller, 1987, 2005). Recent studies on materiality have paid close attention to the embodiment of meaning that follows an object’s re-contextualization, thereby extending the concept of objectification. Consequently, the concept of material embodiment has evolved from the materialization of cultural ideas (Tilley, 2007) toward a dynamic process of materialization that truly values the engagement between

individuals and objects (Ingold, 2007; Dant, 2008; Woodward, 2011).

Consumer culture studies have advanced our understandings of how consumption objects come to objectify particular meaning, values, and social relationships (Epp & Price, 2010; Kravets & Öрге, 2010). However, much less attention has been dedicated to examining the outcomes of consumer interactions with material elements inscribed in consumption objects. In other disciplines, however, researchers examining how consumers interact with objects have noted that individuals not only relate to finished objects but also to the elements that compose those objects. As noted by Ferreira and Scaraboto (2016), consumers relate to the material substances, design intentions, and marketing efforts objectified in the goods they interact with. The authors found that consumers deeply interact with these elements, and further expand the notion of objectification (Miller, 1987; 2005), which mainly focuses on consumers' engagement with finished objects. Ferreira and Scaraboto's (2016) framework divided the process of materialization into its pre-objectification and objectification phases, connected by what they called creative space. In the pre-objectification phase, consumers interact with the thingness of the object (i.e. its material substances, product design, and marketing efforts), while in the objectification phase, consumers re-contextualize the consumption object in such a way that its consumption, as a cultural practice, reflects in and fits into their identity projects. At the center of the framework, creative space becomes the locus of object–consumer interaction. This space is charged with consumer's "emotional energy, which feeds into the consumer's imagination and allows transitions between one's internal and external worlds, and one's current, past, and desired selves" (Ferreira & Scaraboto, 2016, p. 195). Thus, in considering the relevance for consumers of material substances, design intentions, and marketing efforts objectified in consumption goods, we expect that these elements, similarly constitutive of collected goods, will shape consumers' curatorial practices.

To reach sufficient analytical depth, we limit our examination to one of the three elements of Ferreira and Scaraboto's (2016) model and explore the role of material substances in influencing the curatorial practices of collectors. Material substances plays a fundamental role in object–consumer relations (Ingold, 2011). In reasserting Aristotle's reasoning, Ingold (2012, p. 432) noted that any object is “a compound of matter (*hyle*) and form (*morphe*), which are brought together in the act of its creation,” suggesting that the effects of design and material substances cannot be separated. Yet, the author criticized the view predominant in material culture studies that sees form “as actively imposed, whereas matter—thus rendered passive and inert—became that which was imposed upon” (Ingold, 2012, p. 432). Ingold broadened the conception of material substances to consider materials as living, active substances, and invited scholars to speak of these substances' histories—that is “of what they do and what happens to them when treated in particular ways—in the very practice of working with them” (2012, p. 434)—rather than of their properties and attributes. From the perspective that sees material substances as active and dynamic, it is possible to discuss how the properties of certain material substances can provoke action (Borgerson, 2013) when consumers interact with objects made of these substances. Hence, this approach to material substances is appropriate when examining the influence of materials on consumers' curatorial practices.

In attempting to trace the movement of substances and their impacts on consumers' collecting practices, plastic seems to be the ideal focal material. As described by Barthes (1972, p. 11), more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation; as its everyday name indicates, it is ubiquity made visible. And it is this, in fact, which makes it a miraculous substance: a miracle is always a sudden transformation of nature. Plastic remains impregnated throughout with this wonder: it is less a thing than the trace of a movement. In the following sections, we consider plastic to be the predominant material substance on

Melissa shoes, the wearable collectible items that we focus on in this study.

Research Context

We examine the curatorial practices of consumers who collect plastic shoes commercialized under the brand Melissa. Melissa shoes are made of a patented material called Melflex (polyvinyl chloride [PVC] crystals stabilized by calcium and zinc). Essentially, Melflex is a plastic composite that can be melted at 150 degrees Celsius and then molded into any imaginable shape. This material allows designers to create a myriad of different shapes and finishes for Melissa shoes, varying from flats to five-inch heels, from high-gloss to opaque, from sequined to velvety. As interpreters of cultural ideas, designers are influenced by the capacity of plastic to introduce reflexive thoughts into their creative process. For instance, the Melissa flats designed by the Campana brothers¹ are inspired by the designers' furniture-making skills and are composed of plastic shaped as wires and cardboard leaves. Since the brand was repositioned in the 1990s, Melissa shoes have target modern, fashion-oriented consumers. The shoes are launched in fashion collections (with two new collections launched every year), and the brand participates in fashion shows such as *São Paulo Fashion Week*, collaborating with designers such as Jean-Paul Gaultier and Vivienne Westwood. Altogether, over 500 different models, all made of plastic, have been produced by this Brazilian brand, including boots, sandals, pumps, peep toes, sneakers, loafers, and ballet flats. Each model is launched in a variety of colors, and some models are re-issued at every collection in different colors, finishes, or with different appliqués.

As a brand that is rapidly growing in popularity, Melissa enjoys a large and active community of fans on social media and blogs who declare their love for Melissa shoes and exchange information and experiences online. We restrict our study to Brazilian collectors,

¹ Brothers Humberto and Fernando Campana are Brazilian designers with a 30-year trajectory in furniture design. They employ ordinary materials, including scrap and waste products such as cardboard, rope, cloth and wood scraps, and plastic tubes and aluminum wire to create chairs and tables inspired by Brazilian culture. In 1998, the Campana Brothers became the first Brazilian artists to exhibit their work at The Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

but Melissa shoes are sold in many countries and there is also online activity for fans on English and Spanish-based websites. Many of these fans and enthusiasts own collections of Melissa shoes that run from small (five or six pairs) to large (more than 250 pairs). One interesting practice of these consumers as collectors is to produce and post YouTube videos presenting their collections of Melissa shoes. Through these videos, Melisseiras are allowing other consumers and the general public (including researchers) to access their shoe collections and glimpse their curatorial practices involved in assembling, keeping, and displaying them. Prior to the popularization of social media and tools for digital content creation, shoe collections were private and of restricted access, usually kept in the confines of a collector's closet or bedroom (Bourne, 2014). This online repository of content that is created, shared, and commented on by Melisseiras makes this community an ideal context in which to study the curatorial practices of collectors in contemporary consumer culture.

Methodology

To examine consumer relations to material substances objectified in Melissa shoes and the outcomes of these relations on the curatorial practices of these shoes' collectors, we draw from an ongoing netnography of the online community of Brazilian fans and collectors who call themselves Melisseiras. Videos created by these consumers exhibiting their collections of plastic shoes are the primary source of data for this study. The decision to focus on videos was made after extensive online observation of the Melissa fan community. For more than two years (January 2014–May 2016), two of the authors observed websites, social network pages, and blogs dedicated to Melissa shoes. All three authors reflected on their experiences as consumers of plastic shoes and exchanged notes on their relationships to the shoes' material, design, and brand. Two of the authors of this study currently have collections of Melissa shoes, which fueled their participation in the online communities and their understanding of consumers' relations to the shoes.

After identifying the boundaries of the Melissa fan community, the authors made a comprehensive search for terms indicative of collections of Melissa shoes, such as “my Melissa collection,” “my shoe closet,” and “my favorite shoes.” Among all videos posted by Melissa consumers, 111 videos about Melissa collections were identified. These videos were compiled into a YouTube playlist accessible by all three authors and publicly available to interested consumers. The most popular video on the playlist had 338,965 views and 430 comments. The least popular video on the playlist had 305 views and no comments (as of June 17, 2016). Video length varied from 2:23 to 28:29 minutes. The oldest video in our dataset was uploaded on September 24, 2010, and the most recent one was uploaded on June 7, 2015. The 111 videos add up to 1,250 minutes, or almost 21 hours of data.

Our approach to data analysis was borrowed from the field of visual anthropology. Visual anthropology understands that images from a wide variety of medium (e.g., drawings, photographs, and videos) can be studied as visual systems because the visual and visible forms, such as the materiality of objects in the scenes, can be brought together and analyzed as a “range of human activities and representational strategies” (Banks, 1998, p. 8). Our analysis followed Collier’s (2001, p. 39) approach whereby visual data are analyzed in four stages: (1) the data is analyzed as a whole to “discover connecting contrasting patterns”; (2) an inventory of the data is made around the emergent categories in line with the research goal; (3) a descriptive stage aims to bring (some) structure to the analysis; (4) a return to the complete visual records in “search for meaning significance.”

Two of the authors watched all the videos, discussed their insights and impressions, and noted their questions and patterns of consumer–object interaction, which were shared with the third author (Flick, 2009, p. 248). This resulted in the development of a coding scheme. The authors then separately coded the remaining data, and notes were exchanged through the process that allowed the authors to develop their joint interpretation of the 111

videos. In addition, one of the authors created a YouTube video for displaying her collection of Melissa shoes and wrote introspective notes about the process. These notes were read and commented on by the other authors, further informing our understanding of the video-making activities and curatorial practices of collectors.

Findings

Through an analysis of the YouTube videos, we identified a series of curatorial practices that Melisseiras engage in: acquiring, organizing, displaying, storing, and caring for the shoes (which includes cleaning, restoring, and customizing), as well as wearing, trading, and disposing of them. The following sections introduce each of these curatorial practices, describe how they are influenced by the shoes' material substances and illustrate these consumer-object relations with examples from our dataset.

Organizing, Displaying, and Storing the Collected Items: YouTube videos allow Melissa collectors to extend the reach of their collection by displaying it to other consumers. The videos in our dataset are all very similar in their format and content. Collectors usually sit on the floor, in front of their closets, to present their collections. Smaller collections are usually presented in a single video, but larger collections are exhibited in several videos (e.g., one for flats and another for heels). Recent acquisitions are shown in update videos. As they exhibit their collections, Melissa collectors touch every single pair of shoes, frequently caressing some of them in front of the camera. Missing items are also mentioned, and their absence from the video is explained (the most frequent reason is that these shoes were recently used and have been set aside for cleaning). Special items are held for longer, and collectors frequently bring these shoes closer to their faces as they declare love for them (Figure 1).

Take in Figure 1

Collectors who have shoe racks usually describe them as having been custom made to fit Melissa shoes. The shelves are white, which makes the colors and details of the shoes stand out, and some have built-in lighting “to make Melissas shine at night” (Maanuh). Each pair is usually kept with one front-facing and one back-facing shoe to optimize space. Some collectors, however, keep their favorite models “all facing forward” (Paula), materializing their preference for these models (Figure 2). Other collectors store special items away from the rest of the collection, as Fran explains (while touching and holding the shoe): “This is my only Lady Dragon that is not kept under the bed. It is the J. Maskrey one, the Wedding. I store it in the box because I take so much care of it, it is my darling, my loved one. I think I would like to have a shelf to put it on alone. It is my jewel.” Collectors who do not have shoe racks usually keep their Melissa shoes in the cardboard boxes and fabric bags they were sold in. Some consumers keep the shoes in a closet and store the shoeboxes separately, indicating that these boxes are also considered to be relevant component of the collection. In the videos, these collectors comment about the differences in the design of shoeboxes for different Melissa collections and models (Figure 3). Melissa shoes are commonly organized in categories depending on their design and color. In this sense, the design elements of the shoes (shape, finish, and color) influence the ways in which consumers organize, display, and store their collections. The videos evidence the care collectors employ in manipulating, organizing, and storing the shoes. Even though plastic is one of the most resistant and resilient materials (Gabrys, Hawkins, & Michael, 2013), Melissa shoes are treated as fragile by collectors and carefully protected from potential (actual or imagined) hazards. This is not to say that collectors are unaware of the shoes’ plasticity. In several of the videos, collectors mention certain practices that indicate these consumers are well-versed in working with the material (Ingold, 2012), such as using a hairdryer to heat the plastic and widen the shape of a shoe that is too tight.

Take in Figure 2

Take in Figure 3

Wearing and Caring for the Collected Items:

In the videos we analyzed, collectors make brief comments on each pair presented, frequently discussing fit, frequency of wear, form of acquisition, and favorite features. These comments highlight the challenges faced by collectors who not only own but also frequently wear the objects they collect. For example, when displaying a pair of black sandals in the video, Maanuh affirms “Thank God I bought these ones in black, because I’ve worn them so much that if they were white, I’d have had to throw them out already [they would be grimy/stained]”. In the videos, the Melisseiras discuss and demonstrate the tasks involved in maintaining a collection that is always in use.

Plastic shoes require constant cleaning to avoid the development of bad odor through wear. Some of the Melissa finishes require constant maintenance. Shoes that have a velvety or glittery surface, for instance, require careful cleaning with a sponge and occasional reapplication of the elements that give the shoes their texture. Although it is common in Brazil to wash shoes’ uppers and insoles with soap and water after use, Melisseiras tend to clean their shoes much more frequently and thoroughly, also keeping the outsoles as clean as possible. In other words, Melisseiras clean their shoes with particular care and manifest concern for removing even the most minimal signs of dirt from each crevice. This enables the collectors to touch the Melissa shoes and all of their crevices, holding them to their faces to smell, hug, or kiss them (Figures 1 and 4). While some viewers might consider these practices repulsive, they are not frowned upon by Melissa collectors who share the same practice of keeping their shoes immaculate.

Take in Figure 4

Cleaning as a curatorial practice is enacted by many Melissa collectors as a type of ritual. Karina, for instance, shares in a video in which she dusts all of her Melissa shoes before the end of the year so they can “start the New Year all clean.” Some other collectors explain that, once a week, they clean all of the shoes they wore in that week. Others clean each Melissa immediately after wearing it. In fact, we found hundreds of YouTube videos and blog posts in which Melissa fans share tips and procedures for cleaning the shoes. In these cleaning tutorials, consumers recommend products such as banana oil, shoe polisher, acetone, chlorine, and concoctions made with household cleaning products to remove dirt and stains from the plastic shoes (without removing their scent and color, which are desirable material features). Collectors often refer to these videos (made by themselves or other Melissa fans) while displaying their collections and frequently apologize to viewers if any signs of dirt or wear are visible on a shoe they are displaying.

Acquiring and Disposing of the Collected Items:

Melissa models have names (e.g., Mermaid, Incense, Magnolia, and Lady Dragon), and special issues of a model are frequently developed in collaboration with designers. In their videos, Melissa collectors introduce the shoes by their names, the seasonal collection (theme or year) to which they belong, and the designer of each pair. Because some collections exceed 200 pairs, Melisseiras need to develop a considerable amount of knowledge about these marketing elements. This is similar to the extensive knowledge of branded products developed and shared online by consumers who participate in other fan and brand communities (Muñiz & Schau, 2005; Kozinets, 2001).

In addition to knowing these shoes by their marketing features, collectors are familiar with the shapes, materials, and effects that these shoes have on their feet. Frequently,

Melisseiras comment on the models they used to have but have since “detached” from and no longer purchase, alluding to the physical inflictions caused by wearing those shoes (Figure 4). Some collectors manifest conflicting emotions when they keep shoes they cannot make themselves wear because they “kill [their] feet” in their collections. One blogger refers to the Melissa Lady Dragon Heart as “Lady Dragon Hurt,” while the Ultragirl Heel is referred to by another blogger as “Ultra Hell”; materializing in the video the effect the shoes have on the users’ bodies. Our extended involvement with the online community allowed us to observe that one Melisseira created a website called *Melissa Detachment* (Desapego Melissa) for collectors and other consumers to trade, sell, and purchase previously owned or “pre-loved” Melissa shoes. Similarly, various groups exist on Facebook, where tens of thousands of Melissa consumers trade, sell, and purchase used pairs. Others even change their collecting habits according to the type of plastic used in the shoe. Some collectors update their collections to contain only objects launched recently², those made from improved, more comfortable material. For example, Mari explains: “I had never found Melissa heels particularly comfortable, but these last two collections I noticed a very large difference in plastic quality—super squishy, soft, and super quality of comfort (sic). [...] They really raised the bar on the shoe game, and I fell in love with the Three Straps Elevated, so here I have it in three colors.”

Material substances also influences the overall size of a collection. Because Melissa shoes are “high maintenance” (Ana) and rather expensive, consumers defend that the size of the collection is not the most important aspect for its legitimization. In fact, some collectors mention disposing of (or no longer acquiring) certain models that require more maintenance than others (e.g., white shoes). Among the videos we analyzed, consumers who own as few as eight pairs of Melissa introduced these shoes as their collection with the same level of

² Melissa producer Grendene adjusted the formula of Melflex around 2010, and newer Melissa collections are made of a compound that grants these shoes more flexibility than older models.

ceremony as did owners of larger collections. The key narrative found in such videos is defending that a Melissa collection is not about the quantity of items, but about the care and love a Melisseira has for the shoes. In fact, viewers harshly criticize collectors of large collections if they include broken shoes and if they appear to throw their Melissas in a pile after presenting them in the video. Critics make comments such as “You are stupid, I feel like throwing your face [sic] as you throw Melissas... You idiot, you’re far from being a Melisseira” (Mylenna). Even though the plastic shoes are unlikely to break or suffer damage from being thrown on the floor, viewers also manifest anxiety over the carelessness with which a collector manipulates the shoes: “For God’s sakes, my heart even hurts when you throw them like that” (Lulu).

Finally, aspects of the shoes’ material and design frequently influence the choice of a favorite model. Some collectors specialize in certain models of Melissa shoes, such as Fernanda, who has acquired the model Lady Dragon in various colors and finishes as they have been launched by Melissa over the past 15 years. Fernanda’s collection includes more than 20 pairs of the same model, and she refers to them as her “ladies”. The crown jewel, or “the queen of my collection” (Maanuh), is what consumers call a Melissa shoe that is rare (hard to find, more expensive, inherited, or a limited edition) or that has preferred characteristics. Usually, the special items in a collection are introduced with more detail in the videos and displayed in prominent locations in the collections. Consumers frequently manifest their resistance to detaching (Carol) from these models, commenting that they would not “sell [them] for anything in this world” (Ana); even in cases of negative object–consumer interaction, such as when that particular shoe shape hurts their feet.

Another interesting aspect is the absence of concern, among collectors, about the acquisition of used shoes to complete their collections, even though the collectors intend to wear those shoes. Consumer researchers have evidenced the negative perceived effects of

contamination or contagion, whereby consumers feel disgust upon learning that an object has been physically touched by someone else (especially in terms of being in contact with someone else's feet) (Argo, Dahl, & Morales, 2006). However, Melissa collectors do not seem to worry about it. We posit that this is related to the properties of plastic, which is aseptic and can be washed to remove any odors or odor-causing bacteria (Plastics the Mag, 2011). Moreover, because plastic shoes do not spontaneously mold to feet as leather does, it is likely that used shoes keep their original shape even after many years of wear by someone else (Marati, 2012).

Discussion

A fanatical collector of jazz records, Morris Holbrook (1987, p. 145) has an ever-expanding collection that has “slowly encroach[ed] on all aspects of [his] family life.” Although it is not novel for collections to be influenced by emotion, it is interesting that Holbrook's (1987) most cherished jazz records take on sacred status while maintaining their utilitarian function and continue to be listened to. Melissa fan collectors are also affected by strong emotions, but unlike Holbrook's ease in listening to the collected records, maintaining the utilitarian functions of shoes that are part of a collection is rather challenging. As evidenced in our analysis, such an effort requires that consumers interact deeply not only with the finished object but also with its material substances, design, and marketing. In particular, consumers pay attention to the material substance/s that make up the product and adjust the ways in which they handle, store, and/or care for the items accordingly. In discussing our findings, we examine how the pre-objectification elements of the shoes collected by Melisseiras shape these consumers' curatorial practices and the ways in which consumers interpret their collections. Moreover, we reflect on the implications of our findings for theorizing other aspects of consumer behavior for which consumer-object relations are relevant, such as the extended self, cherished objects, and consumer participation in brand

communities.

Consumers as Curators of their Collections

In investigating consumer–material interaction in the curatorial aspects of collecting, we find that rituals associated with display are very fluid so as to accommodate practical matters, such as a collection’s use. Like Holbrook (1987), who keeps his jazz records across multiple rooms in his home, Melisseiras keep their collections at hand. Moreover, some objects are always displaced, as the shoes that are worn and cleaned frequently cannot be kept inert, permanently on display. Interestingly, despite the fact that Melissa consumers demonstrate great knowledge of the brand’s various models, they do not seem to catalog their collections. One major collector counts her collection in a video in response to others’ requests but such an exercise seems futile as a collection changes frequently through acquisition and disposition of items. Finally, the ritual of care is near-fanatical devotion, as even the shoes’ soles are kept as clean as possible, and a lack of care is severely criticized by others. These findings add to the understanding of the curatorial practices of collectors and suggest the need for further research into the roles of pre-objectification elements in collecting.

The Materiality of Collected Items and Consumers’ Identity Work

As our findings demonstrate, consumers as collectors interact with the pre-objectification elements of the collected items. Those interactions shape not only the collections (through curatorial practices) but also collectors’ identities. In contrast to Ferreira and Scaraboto’s (2016) finding that consumer–object interaction generates an overall constructive “third space” full of creativity and imagination, in examining the online displays of Melissa collections, we note that collectors are sometimes harshly judged by audiences when their interactions with the collected items are perceived as harmful rather than creative. This happens when the material integrity of the object is put at risk. As Douglas (1992) points

out, risk works as a cultural strategy by helping social groups to ensure order and stability and to avoid deviance. Whoever transgresses the group boundaries by violating cultural values and expectations is blamed for posing risks to the integrity of individuals in the community (Lupton, 1999). Considering the investment Melissa collectors manifest in caring for their shoes, including the cleaning rituals these collectors engage in, which are similar to a parent's loving cleansing of a child³, it is not farfetched to say that being criticized for throwing Melissa shoes on the floor is nearly equivalent to being accused of treating one's baby carelessly. The strong negative responses a Melissa consumer faces for endangering her shoes reflects a political use of risk (Douglas, 1992): she is pushed outside the community boundaries because of her cultural transgression. However, it may be premature to suggest that politics of curatorial practices exist or are being formed in the Melissa community. The criticisms that a Melisseira faces are likely to have some effect on her sense of self, resulting in adjustments in how she uses the collection to construct her identity (Belk & Wallendorf, 1994).

Collectors as Participants in Brand Communities

In addition to impacting individual identity work, the influences of material substances on curatorial practices also challenge the establishment of group identity. Melisseiras present their collections to one another through YouTube videos and through comments, tags, and shares of these videos. These engagements constitute the collective curation of personal collections (or co-curation), because collectors and their audiences jointly interpret and shape the meaning of the collections. Sometimes collectors question others' consumer identities (or authenticity), as in the case of Melisseiras who criticize the behavior of collectors who do not properly care for Melissa shoes. Lack of care is registered on the physical object (through scratches, stains, or broken parts) and evidenced through the online displaying of collections,

³ We thank an anonymous reviewer of the 2015 ANZMAC Conference for this insightful metaphor

where careless actions and their effects can be observed by many other collectors. Hence, it is important for collectors to understand the normalized (i.e., shared) conventions for relating to the shoes and its material substances in the community before engaging in online displays of personal collections. Belonging to the community is highly relevant for individual collectors because it facilitates access to desired objects and allows them to reap the reputational value associated with owning an extensive or unique collection. Consumer research has explored how brand communities preserve their continuity despite heterogeneity (Thomas, Price, & Schau, 2013), linking community stability to resource interdependence among heterogeneous participants. Further research on communities of collectors could extend this line of work through examining how competition for scarce resources (e.g., rare objects) and conflicting understandings of how collected objects should be curated impact community establishment and continuity.

Finally, our findings connect the study of consumers as collectors to research that examines the value-creating practices of consumers who participate in brand communities (Schau et al. 2009). Further research should examine curating practices for their value-creating potential, given that, through these practices, collectors deepen their knowledge about the pre-objectification elements materialized in the branded shoes, increase their desire for new objects to incorporate into their collections, and develop strategies to establish proximity to marketing managers and manufacturers of the objects they collect. While an individual collector would have difficulties approaching Grendene for information or insights regarding Melissa shoes, the community of Melisseiras has mobilized such significant attention online that they have become an important part of the brand. For example, Melisseiras apply their knowledge of the material substances and how they interact with the body to develop (and share with others) techniques for customizing the shoes, altering their finishing and shape, and preventing them from removing nail polish from one's toes or giving

one's feet blisters; as a result, Grendene now sends collectors insider information about new models and collections and frequently invites them to collaborate in product development. Examining these collaborations between producers and collectors could lead to relevant insights for theorizing value creation in consumer collectives. Another promising area of inquiry is to examine the detachment practices of networked Melisseiras to investigate how alternative economies develop among consumers as collectors.

Conclusion

In times when most discussions of materiality in consumer research center on the digital nature of goods and consider the potential consequences of the lack of tangibility of digital goods for consumers and consumption (including collectors [Watkins et al., 2015, Andersen, 2009]), our study serves as a reminder that moving too far in that direction without anchoring in the foundations of materiality theories—the materials that objects are made of—could lead to the neglect of a rather important area of research. Even though objects have recently gained visibility in consumer research, we are still mostly blind to the presence and relevance of material substances in shaping consumers' social world. Borgerson (2013, p. 129) claimed that “[...] observations ruled by substance-oriented assumptions miss the potential to acknowledge, comprehend, and communicate ongoing interactions, intersubjectivities, and other relation-based processes and practices as they are perceived in a lived world.”

Yet, we note that when substance-oriented analyses are developed with an understanding of materiality as an extended process of objectification that starts before the object is ready to be consumed, overlooking relational aspects is less likely. Material substances are thus seen as an ongoing part of the relation consumers establish with objects (Ingold, 2012). By inviting consumer researchers to look at material substances, we are not discounting the relevance of consumer–object relations in shaping the social world. Rather,

we are noting that material substances also shape the social world and that much of their effects, which often go unnoticed, are mistakenly attributed to finished objects themselves.

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Figures



Figure 1: Favorite objects in the collection: manifesting love through touch
Sources: Screenshot on the left captured from Macalister (2015). Screenshot on the right captured from Scotá (2013).



Figure 2: Displaying by design: collections organized by model and color on white shelves
Sources: Screenshot on the left captured from Scotá (2014). Screenshot on the right captured from Medeiros (2014).



Figure 3: Storing and caring for the collection: the original boxes and bags are kept and cherished.
Sources: Screenshot on the left captured from AnnieSininha (2014). Screenshot on the right captured from Stanlei (2012).

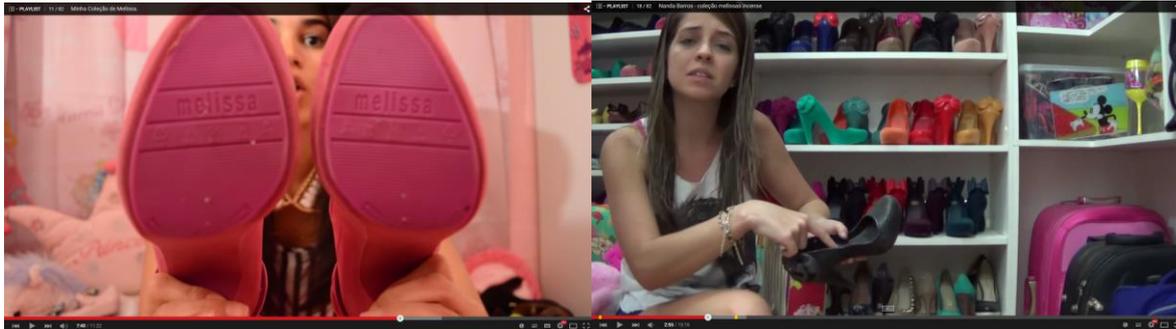


Figure 4: Material–body and design–body interaction as reasons to acquire and dispose of items.

Sources: Screenshot on the left captured from Luiza (2013). Screenshot on the right captured from Barros (2014).