

## **Collecting Our Lives Online: The Use of Digital Media Seen through the Lens of Collecting Practices**

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### **Abstract**

As we become more and more involved with digital technologies on a daily basis, we are in need of a model to make sense of what we *do* with and “in” them. Here we analyze the use of digital media by way of a *collecting* paradigm, since our online activities – centered on selecting, accumulating, organizing, and showing – strongly resemble the practice of collectors. In the first part of the paper, we outline the main traits of collecting practices, and discuss relevant online practices in the light of these traits, thereby tracing the contours of an online “collecting culture.” In the second part, we list the possible underlying causes and motivations for collecting, and investigate how far these explanations also apply to online activity, so offering a preliminary framework for the further study of online practices.

**Keywords:** Philosophy of technology, ICT, online practice, collecting

Life marches on, while collectors trail behind, carrying a shovel and a sack.  
– William Davies King

### **Introduction**

Browsing, clicking, sharing, uploading, downloading, ... Our daily online practices have spawned an array of new verbs or old ones taking on new meanings. These are signposts of intense activity. Whereas most digital technologies originally served calculating and communicating means, today our use of them shines with radiant colors. In what follows we attempt to make sense of this variety of uses, by looking at them from an unexpected angle: our online activities show remarkable similarities with collecting practices and, perhaps, the former share some of the motivations that underlie the latter.

To illustrate what we mean, let’s take a quick look at, for example, your average Web use. Disregard technical considerations for a minute: involvement with keyboards, mouse pads, Wi-Fi networks, ... Even abstract from specific websites with which you’re interacting. Gaze upon the unbridled activity going on. What do you discern? A myriad mass of images, words, sounds, shards of conversation, more or less neatly arranged in more or less prefab patterns, actively structured and consciously unleashed upon a world of onlookers – most of them being just as active – or simply upon ourselves. We grasp, take together, order and observe. We play around with “things,” however information-like, moving them about, amassing them, discarding them. All along our profiles, interfaces, photo pages, music libraries, we keep the view. Gather, name, save, and show. *We collect?*

The ambition of this paper is twofold: to provide a preliminary general outlook on the “culture” of digital activities, and to provoke deeper reflection on that “culture.” Theories about online activities appear as scattered as the activities themselves are diverse. Social science, for instance,

does focus on online user practices, but mostly from a specific perspective.<sup>1</sup> the nature of social interaction through digital media; the effects of Information and Communication Technologies on education, happiness, or cognitive functioning; content analyses of online communications; et cetera. Philosophy of technology provides several general frameworks for the study of technological mediation<sup>2</sup>, yet without paying extensive attention to what users *do* online. Cultural critique addresses certain phenomena such as blogging, file sharing, or social networking sites<sup>3</sup>, but for the most part fails to escape a bias pro or contra digital technology. Now can't we combine a focus on user practices, philosophical breadth, and unbiased cultural observation? Perhaps there is some unity to be found in all our diverse activities, residing in a digital "culture"? By broadening our perspective, in comparing online practices with collecting cultures, we might be able to start indicating this unity. But then, if this indication makes sense, what could it tell us about the underlying motives of our digital behavior? In suggesting a few lines of thought, we hope to kindle further study of online culture in the broad sense.

For the purpose of broadening our view, we will exploit the power of analogy as much as possible. Could we fruitfully apply a collector's point of view to the user of digital media? At least one collector himself hints at this possibility, detecting a decline in collecting activities among the young people of today. Yet, although they are less attracted to "traditional" collecting, namely of "real," touchable objects, "[m]uch of their collecting ... has gone into Facebook or the iPod, all the platforms for compiling countless (digital) objects, carefully arranged in categories and containers just like any collection" (King 2008, p.151). These collections seem as much gathered, arranged, labored on and looked at as your average stamp collection.

To put our hypothesis to the test, we turn to several writings on collecting. Collecting practices have been studied from various viewpoints – philosophical, psychological, social-economical, and anthropological-historical. Our approach will thus, by necessity, be somewhat eclectic. The argument consists of two main parts; in each we first consult the existing literature on "traditional" collecting, and then apply these findings to online activities. The first part of the paper outlines a "culture" of online "collecting" practices. First we describe some defining traits of collecting and collections. Then we discuss relevant online practices and draw comparisons to the found traits. In the second part of the paper, we develop a reflection on the deeper motivations underlying this "culture." Here we first outline a concise overview of the theories concerning the underlying causes of and reasons for "traditional" collecting. Then we attempt to better understand the use of digital media from the perspective of these same motivations: first, by discussing some crucial divergences between "traditional" collecting and digital "collecting," and then, by applying "traditional" explanations to digital "collecting," and working out some of the consequences that this application entails.

### **What Is Collecting?**

Exactly defining the collecting process for once and for all seems impossible. The definitions are as varied as the many authors who have analyzed the phenomenon. We list several of them here:

- "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 2001, p.67)
- "the selecting, gathering, and keeping of objects of subjective value" (Muensterberger 1994, p.4)
- "x times (going there + taking + bringing back)"; "bringing together and beholding" (Sommer 2002, p.208, 8)

- “a philosophical project, ... an attempt to make sense of the multiplicity and chaos of the world” (Blom 2002, p.45)

The diversity of these definitions is reflected in the answers to the questions as to what can be collected, and who collects. *What* can be collected? Collected things can be objects but also experiences, for example relating to travels or relationships; some people “collect” sexual partners (Belk 2001, p.66). But even scientific and educational disciplines have been in the “business” of collecting, namely the collecting of experience, knowledge, and facts. The student gathers knowledge, Walter Benjamin remarks (1983, p.278). In the end, we even collect ourselves, Manfred Sommer proposes, not only in the sense of “regaining ourselves” or “focusing,” but also “in time” (2002, p.124-126).

And *who* collects? According to Susan M. Pearce, about one-third of the North American population collects something (1995, p.vii). But it seems that many more people in some way or another pursue collecting-like activities. Paul Martin claims that nearly everyone engages in ‘unconscious collecting,’ i.e., the storing of things, for example, in Tupperware containers (1999, p.53-54). In a faint sense, everyone is a collector. As William Davies King observes: “Experience makes for story, and stories pile up in memory” (2008, p.161).

Thus, collecting practices can be defined either very specifically – i.e., rigidly – or very generally – i.e., vaguely. For our purposes neither way will be quite constructive. We are in need of a heuristic tool to probe the degree to which online practices resemble collecting activities. Therefore we attempt to list some formal traits every collection or collector exhibits: actions in which every collector, however idiosyncratically, engages. We distinguish between selecting, ordering, looking, accumulating and constructing.

### Selecting

Selection lies at the heart of collecting (Pearce 1995, p.23): not just the picking out of objects, but also assigning certain values to them and investing them with meaning. This implicates or relates to search: finding or trying to find. Thus Walter Benjamin describes collectors as people with a precise tactical instinct (1983, p.274; 1999, p.64). A collector must indulge in the hunt. Yet, bringing together one’s collection can also simply imply waiting (King 2008, p.28; Stewart 1993, p.166).

Selecting an object for collection mostly means lifting it out of the sphere of everyday functionality. According to Jean Baudrillard, every object has two potential purposes: being used and being possessed. When an object is detached from its practical function – becomes subjective, abstract, ‘pure possession’ – it can be included in a collection (2005, p.91-92). Benjamin draws a similar distinction: collected objects belong to the realm of *Vollständigkeit*, opposed to that of the functional (1983, p.271).

### Ordering

Selecting has its necessary counterpart in ordering: arranging, organizing, structuring. First of all in space. Russell W. Belk defines a collection as a ‘set of things,’ comparing it to a photo album (2001, p.66, 152), in which we intentionally sort pictures according to a self-produced scheme. Not so much the objects themselves as the relations among them, i.e., the order one imposes on the objects, constitute the collection, Susan Stewart says (1993, p.155). Form matters more than content (Pearce 1995, p.279).

Yet the designated order of a collection may stand in a paradoxical relation to perceived *disorder*. Benjamin asks: "... what else is this collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order?" (1999, p.62). Indeed, an outsider observing a collection could recognize none of the order the collector puts or "sees" in it. To the "neutral" eye, only chaos appears.

Order also has a temporal aspect to it. According to Stewart, collections are structured not only through space but through time as well. Chronologically, she says, collectors superimpose personal time over social time, autobiography over history, thereby creating "a fiction of the individual life" (Stewart 1993, p.155).

### Looking

Most collections are to be seen and admired. Naturally the collector him- or herself takes precedence over other possible audiences. "[E]very collector has a hungry eye ..." (Muensterberger 1994, p.235). As we've seen, collected objects escape the sphere of usefulness. Instead the collector "... studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate," Benjamin explains poetically (1999, p.62). Likewise, Stewart describes the collection as "... the total aestheticization of use value" (1993, p.151). According to Sommer, finally, the collecting process originates in "... the desire for the lasting presence of all wonderful things, the seeing of which makes us happy" (2002, p.12).

### Accumulating

Tritely put, collectors always want more. They gather, and keep. "What has been brought together in a collection, must stay put" (Sommer 2002, p.213). From there on, collections mostly grow continually. "One cannot but wonder whether collections are in fact meant to be completed, ..." Baudrillard asks (2005, p.99). Yet "growth" can also be qualitative. As Belk observes, some collectors focus rather on 'upgrading' their collection than on expanding it (2001, p.66). Expanding collectors accumulate literally, updating collectors keep the size of their collection (possibly even consisting of just one piece) constant, replacing and discarding an object when they find a better specimen.

### Constructing

One last feature summons up the first four, but should be mentioned to complete our sketch. Collecting can appear as a witless, mechanical pastime. Yet it entails much more than *mere* selecting, ordering, looking, and accumulating. "[C]ollecting is an act of production as well as consumption (Belk 1995, p.55). It's an act of creation, of construction, in its own right.

King compares collecting to artistic practice (2008, p.126). "Collections are not merely owned, they are performed," he says (2008, p.43). According to Pearce, the collector structures his or her collection by way of metaphors that he or she consciously chooses: for example, the idea that things of similar shape or color belong together (1995, p.183). Essential to this structuring is the giving of names; it attests to the fact that collecting constructs and not only copies the material world.

According to Benjamin, again more philosophically, what propels a collector to go find and seize new objects every time is the deep desire "[t]o renew the old world ..." (1999, p.63). In fact, Paul

Martin suggests that the collector's creation can "... in its extremity become a reality" (1999, p.35).

Summary: Collecting as "Way of Doing"

As we've suggested, an exact definition of collecting seems hard to come by. We therefore propose to "define" collecting as a "way of doing" that can be situated and exteriorated in many different contexts, with many different people and objects, and in various forms, but always exhibiting all of the above five traits: selecting, ordering, looking, accumulating, and constructing. This gives us ample room to apply the collecting "model" to the most diverse online practices, while still preserving enough theoretical relevance to make sense of these practices as "collecting processes." To the first task we now turn.

### **Online "Collecting" Practices**

Do our online activities resemble the collector's "way of doing"? To demonstrate they do, we first discuss the five aforementioned characteristics in relation to Information and Communication Technologies (or digital media) generally. Then we briefly list a few of the main categories of online activity, linking the same traits to each more specifically and concisely. We will notice, then, that most online "collections" vary on an axis of knowingness with which the user indulges in a "collecting" practice.

Broadly speaking, most, if not all, of our digital doings consist of selecting: "locating" and "clicking." Mostly, as in "traditional" collecting, some kind of search – e.g., a Google search, or skimming a webpage – precedes this selection. Likewise, the "search" can take the form of "waiting," although waiting times during Internet use are nowadays reduced to a minimum thanks to high-speed connections. The wait is more for other people to react (answer an e-mail, post a comment, ...), or for appropriate situations to arise (the putting online of certain content) – much, actually, as in "traditional" collecting. And, to be sure, often these "quests" and expectancies do serve a non-functional goal (with the exception of strictly business-related communication or activities).

Also organizing and ordering can be detected everywhere in our online "worlds." Contact lists, personal profiles, mailboxes, ... are just as much constructed through time and space as classic collections, although "space" is a tricky concept online and we will return to this issue in the last section. Yet we necessarily find ourselves in "places" as soon as we start "browsing," looking for something – we know *where* to look – or sending something *to* someone. Online structures (e.g., Facebook profiles) are, of course, partly self-designed, partly imposed "from above." But so are photo albums, ready-made stamp albums, cupboards and jars, in which reigns still enough freedom for individual expression.

Then, looking. Obviously, much online material attracts the eye. We've come a long way since the purely textual interfaces of the first personal computers. More than ever, not only equipment is made to impress, but software and websites too get designed accordingly – e.g., by using Adobe Flash to create stunning interactive graphics. We ourselves have a hand in that as well. Deliberately, though often unconsciously, we filter the "material" we put online – e.g., on our personal profiles – according to aesthetic principles, showing only what we want to show. In a quite literal way, online life is in the eye of the beholder.

In a very general sense, accumulating seems a very crucial dynamic in digital media. The Web, for instance, grows bigger every second. But also our online profiles, photo collections, and mailboxes never quite reach a finishing point. Yet at the same time we substitute – i.e., overwrite – much information too: we change profile pictures, erase MP3s to replace them with others, or delete mails to keep our inboxes relevant. Thus we not only expand, but also upgrade. (And, naturally, every piece of hard- or software calls for an update now and then.)

Finally, that construction is part and parcel of our online activities, sounds like a trivial suggestion. So much has the Internet been hailed as an emancipating tool, turning passive consumers into active producers. Surely the Web is a great deal about consuming nowadays, but the main message still holds, as for example “user-generated content” exemplifies. Our online lives consist of countless creative, constructive activities, even if those activities limit themselves to the choosing, picking, and “posting” of other people’s creations (e.g., posting YouTube videos on Facebook profiles) – exactly as collectors often do.

So much for the general outlook; we now list several classes of online activities and point out how our five collecting traits apply to them.

### Social Networking Services

The use of Social Networking Sites (SNS) has risen dramatically during the last couple of years. As of October 2009, Wikipedia lists 164 of them (Anon. 2009), with Facebook, MySpace, and Qzone (in Chinese) as undisputed toppers. SNS profiles can very well be depicted as interactive collections. Users bring together all sorts of data – personal information; pictures and videos; links to favorite movies, music, books; affiliations – and structure these in a more or less prefab spatial pattern, i.e., the layout of the profile (which some sites grant more room to modify than others). In time they thereby also constitute, one could say, ‘a fiction of the individual life’ (Stewart 1993, p.155), as research on digital identities has suggested. Obviously, profiles are meant and made to be watched, by ourselves and our “friends,” but even by complete strangers, depending on privacy settings. “Friends” or contacts, then, also get ordered and organized in categories, by alphabet, by importance – and they just as well wind up in the accumulating dynamic that characterizes SNS profiles: a profile is never “finished”; not even the amount of contacts ever stays constant. In sum, SNS can be characterized as collective, constructive collecting efforts, displaying all of the above traits.

### Online Music and Image Services

Though many online music and image services are conceived as SNS – such as Last.fm and Flickr – they deserve a special mention, because they resemble “traditional” collections quite directly. Photo sites like Picasaweb and Photobucket, video sites like YouTube, peer-to-peer services like BitTorrent, or web hosting companies such as RapidShare very much take the place that was once monolithically occupied by photo albums, record and VHS collections, but now with greater transferability and shareability – pending legal issues and discussions concerning authors’ rights notwithstanding. Although some of these sites do not offer the communication and profiling capacities of SNS, by and far the same observations hold here. Yet more than with SNS – mostly centered on personal profiles – these services tend to constitute “worldwide” data collections, growing exorbitantly every minute due to the possibility of adding “user-generated content.”

### Blogging and Website Design

Although, here too, blogging and microblogging (e.g., Twitter) are components or even crucial aspects of many SNS, we mention them separately. For blogging, and maintaining a website, are akin to collecting in the broad sense that writing in general and diary writing specifically have always been forms of collecting. Benjamin, for instance, remarks that the foremost way of acquiring books is to write them oneself (1999, p.63). Conversely, King avers that “[t]o collect is to write a life” (2008, p.38).

### E-mailing and Chatting

We might not always consciously perceive it, but E-mailboxes are full-blown databases of our communicative and social lives. They often offer a retrospective archive of what we’ve said and done at this or that time, to a greater or lesser degree ordered (folder tree structures, filters, rules, et cetera), but always easily searchable and manageable. Thus they constitute a collection mostly without the user or mailer deliberately striving for it; this is an important observation to which we will return shortly.

### Virtual worlds

However less obvious as “collecting” practice, virtual worlds – such as MUDs (Multi User Dungeons) – do fit the scheme we’ve outlined: one can select and sculpture one’s personage, structure and organize a private space, expand one’s boundaries – literally and figuratively – and store all these parameters into the database of the website proprietor. In so far as it’s possible to collect experiences, the severely controllable environments of online worlds surely count as collections of “second lives.” And as Martin reminds us, such a construction can “... in its extremity become a reality” (1999, p.35).

### Bookmarking and Bots

The individual user practice of bookmarking – browser “favorites,” for example – doesn’t ask for much elaboration. But lately online variants of bookmarking have surfaced that fully employ the sharing power of Social Networking: Digg, Delicious, StumbleUpon, ... These websites make it possible to rate, vote for, categorize, or comment on (the content of) other sites. They are based on the concept of ‘crowdsourcing’ – the outsourcing of a task to a large group of people, usually through the Internet, thus gathering a lot of small efforts to make for a big result. In a general way, these sorts of information-assembling applications stand for a more “human” approach to Web search that takes into account content and meaning of information. Search engines such as Google, by contrast, have been performing searches up until now based purely on formal rules, “automatically,” i.e., by way of search bots that crawl the Internet, however also to literally collect, select, and then arrange data according to a ranking algorithm. (We will return to this in the paragraph about ‘The Semantic Web.’) What’s interesting is that these more or less automatic, more or less conscious mechanisms lead up to, again, a “worldwide” collection of collections, generated and called upon in an instant.

### Online Shopping

E-commerce – be it firsthand or secondhand – establishes a form of online “collecting” just as well. Obviously each store, hardware or software, can be seen as an accumulation of goods; but that doesn’t make it a collection. What brings e-stores nearer to collections are the interactive techniques they employ to exploit customers’ online actions and behavior and to enrich their

visible content and commercial strategy. Take, for example, the purchase advice offered by Amazon.com: ‘More Items to Consider,’ ‘Related to Items You’ve Viewed,’ ‘Inspired by Your Browsing History,’ all based on the items at which you’ve looked; ‘Customers Who Viewed This Item also Looked at,’ ‘Customers with Similar Searches Purchased,’ based on other people’s actions. But not only that, customers get the opportunity to deliberately rate products or write reviews about them. A store thereby becomes more than simply a store, namely, a publicly – willingly or not – organized arsenal of information and offerings. Here we must again call into mind Baudrillard’s and Benjamin’s conviction that the collected object escapes the purely functional sphere: user input – though it can be criticized as a commercial abuse of free consumer labor – links up countless “lived experiences” with commodities, personalizing and decommodifying the latter in a sense.

### The Semantic Web

The emerging developments around the Semantic Web, finally, take this sort of collecting paradigm a step further. Semantic Web applications not only store and transfer information, but also endeavor to specify its meaning, i.e., semantics. Such applications would be in a way “self-understanding,” and this should enable hardware and software agents to better handle Web content. The structural manipulation of information in accordance with its meaning, formerly left mainly to human users in the case of bookmarking or e-shopping, would thus be dealt with by intelligent, “interpreting” algorithms. They would combine the high efficiency of automatization, exemplified by search bots, with meaningful data handling and structuring. The “collecting” process thereby becomes largely unconscious to the Web user.

### Digital “Collections”: Conscious and Unconscious; Offline and Online

As we’ve seen, online practices exhibit to a fairly great extent each of the five aforementioned traits of collecting. But additionally we’ve detected an axis, or spectrum, on which these practices can be situated: the relative knowingness with which users “collect”-- that is, consciously select, order, look or make available for looking, accumulate, and construct. Sometimes the computer code just takes over these tasks. Thus, from SNS as highly personally structured “collections,” to the Semantic Web as a “self-collecting” digital organism, the degree in which we consciously and willingly “collect” varies.

Another point we need to make, before turning to take up the topic of motivations for collecting in the second part of this paper, is that the sort of digital “collections” we’ve talked about needn’t necessarily be *online*. In fact the list of contacts on our mobile phones or PDAs, the music on our mp3 players (as King already suggested), the data on our hard disks, are all forms of digital, albeit offline, “collecting,” only less shareable than their online variants.

### The Meaning of Collecting

Many of the quoted theorists have tried to explain collecting, or at least to understand it better. And just as an exact definition of collecting can scarcely be found, we mustn’t expect only one “explanation” for collecting either. In what follows, we outline several explicatory models, ranging from the psychological, through the philosophical and anthropological, to the social-economical, that try to unravel the reasons for, causes of, or motives for collecting.



### ‘Extended Self’

According to Belk, our possessions, and specifically our collections, can be looked upon as parts of an ‘extended self’ (1988, 2001). What’s more, we genuinely experience them as part and parcel of our selves. We abruptly notice how strong this attachment can be when we fall victim to a fire or theft. Collected objects furnish us with the possibility of enlarging our sense of self, but in a constructive way: “... unlike arms and legs, the choice and assembly of objects to form a collection is ostensibly a self-expressive creative act that tells us something about the collector” (2001, p.89). Collections say things about us we would not dare to say aloud. And, importantly and consequently, the desire to complete a collection matches the wish to complete oneself.

### Objects for Humans

Some theorists, mainly relying on psychoanalytical concepts, have analyzed the collecting process as a turning away from human relationships. Baudrillard (2005, p.91-114), for one, links collecting to sexuality. He sees collecting as a regression, as a fleeing back behind the genital sexuality. “Real,” human relationships are threatening. Collected objects, on the contrary, harbor a safe, conflict-free haven, because they are sexless. Yet, although collecting is a regressive, infantile act, it at least prevents one from further regression into total delusion ( p.114).

Werner Muensterberger (1994) develops an analogous but distinct line of thought. According to him, the urge to collect originates in a – mostly unconscious – memory of a loss, deprivation or vulnerability, and a consequential desire for substitution. Collected objects fulfill the same purpose as “transitional objects” for young children. A blanket or a toy, for example, substitutes for the mother object and thus compensates for its absence, “... evidently aiding the illusion not only of being protected but also, quite literally, in touch” ( p.253). As such, the collector collects substitutes for the primary mother object ( p.44). But more than with Baudrillard, this practice definitely has an upside. As a coping mechanism, an effort to re-stabilize the ego, and a means of countering loss, collecting is “... by no means an unhealthy ego defense” ( p.252).

Still, collections can also substitute for humans in a fully positive way, namely when we “make” human beings of them. We anthropomorphize objects, “... so that a person-thing relationship becomes a person-person relationship” (Belk 2001, p.76). King puts it poetically: “Possessing a new object feels like learning something or meeting someone, and there is happiness in that” (2008, p.42). Sometimes collectors even have the feeling they are “rescuing” the items they acquire (Benjamin 1999, p.65-66).

### Infatuation

A related, but quite different explanation is framed in terms of passion and emotion. Thus, for Benjamin, collecting is a passion, fraught with memory (1999, p.61-62). According to Baudrillard, collected objects lifted out of the sphere of use value enter the “passionate abstractness of possession” (2005, p.92). Belk avers that collecting is a highly engaging, passionate form of consumption (2001, p.66). Also Pearce and Martin describe the collecting process as both emotionally involving and psychically energizing (Martin 1999, p.46; Pearce 1995, p.221).

More specifically, collecting can be said to resemble infatuation and romantic love. Muensterberger identifies attachment to one’s collection with the over-evaluation observed among young lovers (1994, p.230). Belk writes: “Perhaps the best analogy for this kind of

behavior is ... romantic love” (2001, p.148). Yet, as being in love can bring the greatest happiness, it can also cause the most dreadful pain: “... passion involves suffering, and collecting is no exception” (p.149). Mostly this suffering takes the form of guilt. Feelings of guilt can arise out of the “economic” activity of purchasing – spending money on “nonuseful” items purely for individual reasons. But they can just as well originate in the narcissistic urges and pride a collector experiences (Muensterberger 1994, p.53).

### Reviving the Past

Our collections help us remember; they are a “memory standing outside the self” (Stewart 1993, p.133). According to Benjamin collecting is a form of practical remembrance (1983, p.271). Not only does a collector recall the context of the acquisition of an object, he says, his “memory” includes the details surrounding the item as well: former ownership, place of origin, category, ... All this “past” comes together in the collector’s collection. Pearce sees a collection as a product of an individual life, and as a means to structure that life. Moreover, collections, or more specifically acquisitions, can serve as rites of passage (1995, p.235-236).

Remembrance, when cultivated, can take the form of nostalgia. Souvenirs can establish contact with a past time, “... and at the social as well as the philosophical level this is of great significance to modern people for whom a feeling of rootlessness becomes increasingly oppressive ...” (Pearce 1995, p.244). Martin agrees, mentioning nostalgia as a defense mechanism against the growing insecurity of a market-ruled, “spectacle-driven” society that gains speed everyday (1999, p.96).

### Assuring the Future

Collecting can also help to establish a future. By force of its creative character, it can open up unforeseen possibilities: “Collecting, it appears, is not just a time one can pass through, it is also, in itself, a pass which time can open out” (Pearce 1995, p.239). Through collecting one can discover, decide, and change course.

On a more metaphysical plane, collecting can be seen as an “opening up” of the future. Stewart, unlike Pearce, opposes the collected object to the souvenir. Whereas the souvenir is an attempt to revive the past, to focus on the past, the collection is all about forgetting, and putting the past in the service of the collection. Comparing the collection to Noah’s Ark, Stewart says: “The world of the ark is a world not of nostalgia but of anticipation” (1993, p.152). For Benjamin, likewise, the acquiring of a book, by a book collector, constitutes the rebirth of that book. It brings about a renewal of the world (1999, p.63).

There is, however, a somewhat darker aspect to this. According to Baudrillard, objects give us the possibility of “controlling” time, i.e., denying it in a sense. “[T]he organization of the collection itself replaces time” (2005, p.102). More precisely: by collecting we try to counter the irreversibility of time. The endless ‘series’ of the collection, and the fact that it’s never finished, creates cyclical time and so replaces the irreversible time that rushes from birth to death. “[I]f the function of dreams is to ensure the continuity of sleep, that of objects ... is to ensure the continuity of life” (p.105).

In more practical and everyday terms, this may mean that a collection lives on even after its collector has died. Thus it can just as well be a sort of “insurance” against dying – “I will survive in the form of...” – or at least a way of coming to terms with one’s own death (Pearce 1995, p.248-250).

## Telling a Life Story

Nostalgia and remembrance have a narrative aspect. Martin stresses the story-telling capacity of objects and collected items (1999, p.2). Mieke Bal identifies collecting with a story, "... and everyone needs to tell it." (Bal 1994, p.103). Pearce explains how collections are "... essentially a narrative of experience ..." (1995, p.412). And King once again puts it succinctly when he says: "To collect is to write a life" (2008, p.38). That means collecting contains an aspect of fabricating and fantasizing too. As Stewart notes, the narrative isn't about the object, but about the owner. "[T]he economy of collecting is a fantastic one ..." (1993, p.158). Through our collections, we not only remember what really happened, we also experience, "relive" what could have happened, but did not.

## A Subversive Effort

From a social-economical viewpoint, collecting can be analyzed as an act of subversion: an attempt to reject the world of accepted material values (Pearce 1995, p.188-189). In a world filled with commodities that constantly pushes us to go through the cycle of first consuming and then discarding, a "conservative" effort like collecting can help to make a statement.

Martin (1999) specifically examines collecting as a "societal coping mechanism," as a search for security and identity in an increasingly fluid, changing and vaguely defined society. Martin traces the upsurge of recent (end of the 1990s) popular collecting back to the growing instability of labor-related and social contexts during the last decades of the twentieth century.

Belk, however, places the practice of collecting straight in the middle of consumerist society. Not only did collecting come to full fruition together with industrialist, modern capitalist society, "... collecting is the essence of materialism" (2001, p.viii). It not only copies the characteristics of consumerism, it radicalizes them too. "[C]ollecting is consumption writ large" ( p.1). That's not to say that it represents a dumb acquiescence of capitalism. "The heroic collector is also engaged in a struggle against conspicuous waste" ( p.150). Thus, as much as collectors rebel, they also imitate and even "practice" market-related skills.

## Magic and Sacredness

A good many theorists point out how collecting practices verge on the magical and sacred. King, for one, considers the collector a throwback to times when objects were seen as animated (2008, p.32). Martin notes how "[t]he collection is the realization of dream-time" (1999, p.19). Benjamin similarly remarks that the collector experiences "a piece of dream life," where everything flows and all perception concerns *us* (1983, p.272). From a more historical viewpoint, Belk detects a gradual evolution of the form of 'the sacred' in Western society: "... from religion to non-commercial objects of art and nature to commercial branded objects ..." (2001, p.21). He claims that we cannot understand the meaning of our possessions as long as we don't try to capture their magic. In fact, he avers, the term 'true collector' is the secular equivalent of 'true believer.' Stewart, also, observes the work of the consumer to be "a labor of total magic" (1993, p.164).

Pearce (1995) investigates the relation between collected objects and magic a little more deeply. Collecting goes way back, in fact, to the hoards and graves of our ancestors. Objects have always had a sacred power, constituting a bond between our world and the realm of the dead or the gods. Purchasing or acquiring an item retains the magic that objects used to contain in former times.

Likewise, Benjamin sketches the collecting process as an attempt to fix objects inside a *Bannkreis*, a magic circle; the collection becomes a “magical encyclopedia,” and the collector a sort of fortuneteller or *Schicksaldeuter*, who, when looking at his objects, appears to gaze through them, into their distance (1983, p.274-275; 1991, p.389; 1999, p.62).

### Our ‘Materially Attuned Mindset’

As we’ve just seen, Pearce (1995) traces back collecting to its ancient origins. Yet not only did we keep our magical relation with objects alive; we – Europeans – also have a history that’s made us especially attentive to the material world, furnishing us with a “mindset materially attuned.” According to Pearce, this originates in the oath-ordeal-distinction so crucial to our ancestors, that led us in turn to strong notions of individualism and individual rights, a sharp dichotomy between man and outward things, the perceiving of objects in emotional and sacred terms, and at last the concepts of romantic love and the free choice of marital partners, all pushing us to a life concentrated on the acquisition of material objects. Material objects are seen to have a transforming power: they bring about profit, prestige, social authority, emotional power, knowledge, and, as mentioned, they establish a bridge between this and ‘the other’ world.

Thus, we have always lived close to our objects, in more than one sense – the roots of our materialist attitude do not simply reside in capitalist consumerism, rather, consumer society *accentuates* our relation with objects instead of causing it (Martin 1999, p.48). We have always tried to understand our world *through* material substance, as the workings of science and industry demonstrate. Every collection, too, follows that tradition of looking at our social and material surroundings with a calculating eye, and so (re)asserting ourselves. What’s more, Pearce’s thorough study shows that collecting attitudes elude the boundaries of class and gender: in the world of collecting, we all react to objects in the same way – though each with an idiosyncratic twist. It appears that we collect as a way of life: collections aren’t in us, we are in them, as also Benjamin remarks (1999, p.69; although he tends to mention the opposite in 1983, p.273). We live with, in, and by them.

### Online vs. “Traditional” Collecting

Thus far we’ve listed some explanations and motivations for “traditional” collecting. Can we constructively apply these to online “collecting”? We will immediately argue we can. But before we do so, we have to tackle one obstacle that stands in the way of an alltoo-easy analogy. In “traditional” collecting we gather material things – things that can be touched – whereas in the digital realm “objects” stay, by necessity, “virtual.” In this section we elaborate briefly on three issues related to the materiality, or immateriality, of collected objects: can one really collect “untouchable,” i.e., virtual goods? What is then left of the “hunt,” once so crucial to “traditional” collecting? And, lastly, how far does this immateriality touch on the social aspect of online “collecting”?

#### Can One Collect “Untouchable” Goods?

All “traditionally” collected things – coins, stamps, statuettes, books, ... – seem to have at least one feature in common: they can be touched and handled; they take up “real” space; they are solid. This “touchability” undoubtedly plays a significant role in much collecting. Sommer describes the collecting practice as “... move by foot, *grasp* by hands” (2002, p.209). Moreover, the feeling, caressing, fumbling, and arranging of one’s collected items can provide for great

pleasure. Also, the touching of objects may elicit or contribute to the magical powers expected from them (Stewart 1993, p.139).

According to Martin, recent popular collecting could be partly a reaction to the digital revolution. “The never-never land of cyberspace provides a digital alternative environment for the individual while collecting offers a tactile one” (1999, p.32). Whereas the digital lets us play with different identities, collecting is a means to re-conquer a lost identity, or one from the past, he says. While the information age demands us to renew our identities all the time, thereby uprooting us, objects *are*. They give us shelter in the safety of the past. Collecting thus forms a way of speaking of ourselves in the third person, according to Martin.

Yet there are reasons, first, not to regard “touchability” as an essential characteristic of collecting and, second, not to analyze digital technology as the archenemy of fixed or past identities. First, even in “traditional” collecting, touching the object doesn’t need to be a priority. A record collection, for example, obviously takes up space, and consists of specific objects – particular pressings, special or first releases, signed sleeves, ... But although its collector may not buy the albums mainly to listen to them, the music itself surely accounts for much of the attraction. Quite the same goes for collections, for instance, of figurines or plates, that are not so much meant to be touched as to be seen. Here another quality than tactility takes the fore. Moreover, a status of “untouchability” can just as well suggest magical forces at play. Why would an untouchable collection be less real?

Second, counterposing digital technology to tactile objects, with the first enhancing multiple identities and the latter keeping us grounded in a stable context, seems to be less and less reasonable these days. Disregarding identity theft and abuse, the “Web 2.0” – the Web of social networking, blogging, and “user-generated content” – invites us more and more to “reveal ourselves,” to show ourselves “as we are,” and to maybe take on multiple identities, but in a way not remarkably different from what we do in “real” social life, where we are also never “one” person. The anonymity of early mainstream Internet has largely given way to a desire of defining ourselves completely.

#### What Is Left of the “Hunt” in Digital “Collecting”?

Another issue, closely related to the previous one, touches on a component of collecting Walter Benjamin enthusiastically describes: the hunt. The “thrill of the hunt” can make collecting worthwhile, and it adds to a sense of success and accomplishment (Belk 2001, p.92-93). The hunt, in a sense, relates to magic too: “Finding something feels like a miracle, confirmation that the world is providential” (King 2008, p.112). Pearce (1995), again, unlocks the historical roots of our hunting instinct. According to her, the hunt of the collector originates in the oath-ordeal scheme forming the base of our world view, with ordeal – the challenge to be faced and overcome – eventually taking the shape of the quest, of the hunt.

Hunting has an essentially spatial aspect to it. Yet how do we go about moving digitally? In the virtual world Second Life, an avatar (the user’s visual representation) can move “by foot,” or by transportation means such as cars or helicopters, but it can also simply be “teleported” to wherever in the online world. If we “collect” online, surely the hunt must be much less thrilling. Then again, maybe our ordeals have been displaced to the level of “profiling.” Not only profiling ourselves – in the case of “exhibiting” ourselves on social networking sites – but also, and maybe more, the profiling, scanning, and testing of information: “Is this real?”; “Do I need to know anything more about it?”; “Do I have the right version?”; “Will this work?”. The installing of

software, or the arranging of a web page, for example, can challenge us, trivially but noticeably, too. Perhaps the immense amount of FAQ pages, forums, and support sites on the Web testifies to a new, “postmodern” sort of hunt: the quest to “get this thing working.” Certainly we still have a lot of work to do to get our online “collections” going. Moreover, we should keep in mind that troubles, difficulties, obstacles, and barriers have a meaning of their own: they must be battled, crossed, defeated.

### Collecting Together, Collecting Each Other

Collecting has “immaterialized.” Yet how does this affect the collector’s relation with “the others”? Collecting used to be largely a solitary activity. Belk characterizes collecting as mostly an individual enterprise; it is a socially sanctioned form of “selfish indulgence” (2001, p.72). Pearce describes the collected object as a gift from the collector to him- or herself (1995, p.369). Collecting has something undoubtedly individualistic about it.

Then again, “the others” always surround us. Although we are ‘egocentric,’ others are just as well, and we’re aware of that (Sommer 2002, p.187). What’s more, as even Baudrillard alleges, collecting can stretch out into “culture” and partly elude the pure relation between collector and collection. The search for a desired item can make a collector reach out to friends, competitors, or strangers for help (2005, p.113). According to Pearce, collectors are not necessarily “loners,” as folk psychologies sometimes depict them. Research has shown that their relationship patterns largely concur with national standards (1995, p.226). Some of them visit collectors’ clubs regularly, although they tend to have ambivalent relations with their co-collectors, because of competition ( p.231). Nevertheless, these communities sharpen collectors’ social capacities. “Collectors are, as a rule, remarkably good at connecting or networking,” King claims (2008, p.77).

So collectors are never really alone. This surely qualifies online “collecting” too, and even more. “Collecting digitally,” we easily connect with other people, our “co-collectors.” Just as in a club, they help us out during our quests, searches, and tasks, or they provide an audience. Does the Web resemble a giant collector’s club? The aforementioned “crowdsourcing,” for example, looks a lot like a collector’s club activity. A lot of people doing a lot of small jobs – gathering data, tagging images, correcting texts – add up to a body of work, knowledge or information that never could have been assembled by one person, just as the collector’s club total expertise exceeds the sum of the individual experiences of the members.

Yet haven’t we crossed a border? The collected object is always something brought in “from outside,” made “ours.” As Pearce puts it: “[t]he material available for collection comes to us from the Other, essentially different and distant, but we will turn it into sensible Sameness by interpreting it in the light of understood parameters” (1995, p.311). Only, ‘the Other,’ now, might just as well be literally “an other,” namely another *person*. Through our “friends” list on social networking sites and our contact databases on our mobile phones, for example, we collect other humans too – not in a bodily or physical sense, obviously, but certainly in a possessive sense: there it is, black on white, “these are my friends,” and by extension, “this is me.”

But is this a new, let alone a bad, thing? King, once again, observes poetically: “We are born wanting to be had and held, born collectible, and with a little luck we never stop being prized possessions” (2008, p.74). And as we’ve seen, collecting can resemble infatuation. In love, one longs to possess his or her love object, but also to be possessed, to be an object. Even in “real” life, we collect each other. Why would it be any different online?

So, we have seen that first, the “untouchability” of digital “objects,” second, the modification of the “hunt” online, and third, the social dynamics of digital “collecting,” do not necessarily stand in the way of applying explanatory models of “traditional” collecting to online practices. But what happens if we do so? That is the theme of the following, and final, section of this paper.

### **Understanding Online Practices through the Collecting Paradigm**

In the section above, we’ve discussed the main explanations for collecting practices that theorists have furnished: collecting as an ‘extended self’; as a substitute for human contact; as passion; as remembrance; as anticipation; as a subversive or consuming act; as magic; or as culturally inherited, object-oriented behavior. With the issue of materiality now out of the way, we can focus full force on the implications these explanations could entail for the comprehension of online practices. First, we briefly point out some analogies between these explanations and existing research on ICT and technology. There appears much concurrence between the two; yet the collecting paradigm gives us the opportunity to broach the subject in a more comprehensive manner. Then, second and finally, we again pull back our focus and, by way of returning to our definition of collecting as a “way of doing,” sketch out an explorative framework for the study of online practices as a “culture.”

#### Explanations of Collecting Practices vs. the Study of Technology

How far do motivations of and reasons for collecting behavior resemble analyses already supplied in the general domain of the study of technology, and where do lacunae appear? We briefly elaborate on the aforementioned explanations in the same order as before.

##### ‘Extended Self’

Do we regard our online “collections” as parts of ourselves? Do they extend our selves? In the philosophy of technology, extension theories have been around for quite a long time. From Ernst Kapp’s *Grundlinien einer Philosophie der Technik* (1978), through Marshall McLuhan’s concern with media as narcotic enhancements (2003), to recent work on embodied cognition and distributed intelligence (Clark 1997, 2003; Hayles 1999), technologies are defined in one way or another as extensions (prostheses, ‘organ projections’) of human body parts, capacities, or senses. These theories, however, do not work out in detail the extension idea with regard to the “self,” and they don’t examine online activities, or do so only marginally. Sherry Turkle, by contrast, analyzes computers and computer-related practices (such as participating in MUDs and chatting) as full parts of our social and psychological lives, and online identities as ‘second selves’ (1995, 2005) – yet without employing the concept of extension. The collecting paradigm could furnish us with an overall framework to combine extension theories with the study of digital identities.

##### Objects for Humans

Do online “collections” also substitute for humans, negatively or positively? Obviously there’s been some concern that online video games, virtual worlds, and even SNS make people turn away from “real” social contact, especially in the case of so-called “problematic computer use” or ‘Internet Addiction’ (Block 2008). However, these online “places” have also been said to possess their very own social potentialities, and to offer safe havens for interactions that would otherwise be nearly impossible, just as collections could shelter us from the conflict-ridden complexity of sociality (Schroeder & Axelsson 2006; Turkle 1995). And in relation to the anthropomorphization

of online “collections,” we should refer to research on the ‘media equation,’ which holds that people treat computers as social actors, i.e., as real people or places (Nass, Steuer & Tauber 1994; Reeves & Nass 1996). Lastly, Don Ihde investigating human-technology relations, has suggested that in ‘alterity relations’ we interact with technology as if it was “an other” (1990, p.97-108).

### Infatuation

Do we invest our digital lives with intense emotion too? Browsing SNS profiles, for example, can be a passionate, highly involving activity. Donald Norman, for one, has made a plea for considering emotion an important – if not the most important – factor in the use of technologies and, by consequence, in technological design (2004). Can passion, love, and infatuation shed light on our online behavior, and how? Here a whole field for further research seems to lie open.

### Reviving the Past

Aren't online practices as diverse as the bookmarking of our daily occupations on Social Networking Sites, the preservation of ancient manuscripts by scanning them into computers, or the massive Google digital library project all attempting at, or resulting in the exteriorization of our memories? In fact, applied scientific research has more than once proposed technological remembrance as a main goal for ICT development. From Vannevar Bush's ‘Memex’ (1945) through David Gelernter's ‘Mirror Worlds’ (1991) to Gordon Bell's ‘MyLifeBits’ (Bell & Gemmell 2007), several authors have outlined an ideal of technological remembering. Recently, however, there has been a growing debate over the degree to which “eternal” remembrance should be cherished either as a virtue (Bell & Gemmell 2009) or as a vice (Mayer-Schönberger 2009) of digital technologies. The philosophical implications of these issues have only begun to be investigated.

### Assuring the Future

Just as we try to safeguard the past through digital “collections,” don't we also attempt to ascertain the future? As digitalization projects proliferate, we try to tackle destruction, erosion, and neglect in order to preserve information for future generations. On an individual level, ‘digital immortality’ is no utopian ambition. Already, SNS profiles “outlive” their owners; sometimes relatives of the deceased will keep on posting messages to the profile to keep the memory of their loved ones alive, or to help themselves in their mourning process (North 2007). Web services such as [www.legacy.com](http://www.legacy.com), [www.forevernetwork.com](http://www.forevernetwork.com), or [famento.com](http://famento.com) offer the possibility of storing and sharing ‘life stories’ and other data, thereby creating a digital memory of oneself or someone else, that would live on even after the person concerned has died. Bell and Gemmell foresee that with the help of artificial intelligence digital avatars could be developed that minutely simulate, for instance, one's speech patterns; conversely, one could imagine talking to an avatar of one's great-grandfather (2009, p.151ff.). On the whole, however, these are quite recent phenomena, and they should be more thoroughly studied.

### Telling a Life Story

They nevertheless seamlessly link up to the narrative approach. Collectors tell a story through their collections. Does this also account for digital “collections”? Narrative theory has been applied to communication *per se* (Fisher 1987). But also some of the “ways of doing” we've observed to be far exceeding communication alone have lately been connected to narrative concepts, e.g., virtual reality (Ryan 2001; Balet, Subsol & Torguet 2003). It goes to show that



what counts here as “narrative” not only consists of textual information but also and even more so of visual expression and interaction.

### A Subversive Effort

Does online activity exhibit the same curious mix of anti-hierarchical and “co-hierarchical,” i.e., consuming behavior as collecting practices? It surely seems so: digital technologies furnish us with utilities to undermine capitalist hierarchy and consumerist society, but at the same time commercial enterprises and market economy logic still dominate them. On the one hand, what Paul Levinson calls ‘new new media’ (2009), i.e., many-to-many media – blogs, video sites, SNS – furnish minority groups with the possibility of voicing their demands or disagreement, sometimes by simply constructing a Facebook page. On the other hand, digital media still thrive on commerce, sometimes without us even noticing it. Take eBay: at face value an empowering tool that brings commerce, in the form of ancient barter, back “to the people,” but behind the scenes a company that makes profit out of the free labor done by its millions of users (showing their products, answering questions, packaging and sending, ...) (Lillie 2006).

### Magic and Sacredness

Are we enchanted about our digital “objects” too? It is hard to demonstrate this practically, but Marshall McLuhan claims ‘electric technology’ to be a return to the conditions of the ancient or primitive tribe: simultaneity, instantaneity, involvement, auditory-tactile ways of interacting. “The young today live mythically and in depth” (2001, p.100). Surely instant contact through our e-mails, SMSes, and online profiles retains much of the mythical flavor of magic wands, totems, and sorcery; and as we search through Google’s pages, we cannot but be stunned by this ‘magical encyclopedia’ that delivers us all we’ve asked for in just the blink of an eye. It would perhaps be interesting to expand this theme of “electronic magic” into the general study of myth, archetype, and sacredness.

### Our ‘Materially Attuned Mindset’

Does our ‘materially attuned mindset’ also explain our digital “collecting,” notwithstanding the immaterial character of the latter? Contrarily, within information science, there has been research relating to the “thingliness” of digital entities, for instance on the general character of digital objects (Ekbja 2009), or on identifying them (Allison, Currall, Moss & Stuart 2005). Provocatively, Philip Zhai (1998) even claims the virtual to be as real as “reality,” with no ontological difference between the two. The statute of the “digital thing,” undoubtedly, will keep on instigating future research.

### Our Online “Collecting” Culture

As we’ve seen, explanations of collecting concur to a certain degree with existing analyses of technology in general or ICT. Yet just as online practices exhibit the utmost diversity, these research results stay dispersed and fragmented. It is the collecting paradigm that gives us the opportunity to approach this diverseness in a more encompassing way. That would have a series of consequences that, taken together, would start to make visible the contours of a framework with which online practices can be comprehensively analyzed as “online culture.” As a provocation to further research on this topic, we list four of these consequences: structural, methodological, practical, and ethical.

The first, and most important consequence of such an approach would be structural: the understanding of online practices as a “way of doing,” as a “life project.” Just as collecting means much more than mere accumulation, online practices exceed pure communication or even social networking. That is not to disparage specifically oriented research. But in a world tangled up in technology more and more each day, we also need an overall outline of “digital activities.” As we’ve shown, the study of digital identities or technological memory, for example, has begun to come to grips with this challenge. As digital environments – in the broad sense of the word, encompassing not only virtual worlds but also, for instance, SNS – are becoming more allround, refined, and multifunctional – embracing not only networking tools but also mail, video sharing services, and search mechanisms – we need to look upon digital activity as an all-inclusive, daily condition of life. The phenomenological concept of ‘being in the world,’ for instance, has become very much applicable. Conversely, we can attempt to make sense of specific issues, such as the question of technological remembering vs. forgetting (see above), from the general viewpoint of digital “collecting” practices.

Consequently, there appears to be a lot more room for methodological maneuver than formerly thought. That is the second consequence. Instead of approaching online practices from one or two of the aforementioned viewpoints, we now realize that such practices can potentially be framed in terms of *all* of them, and at the same time. To put it in the words of Don Ihde, technology is overdetermined (2008, p.13-14). Several factors mold technology into its eventual form. Likewise, online practices, just as collecting practices, have more than one meaning or origin, and can be explained and investigated from various angles, within one overall view. That would create openings for the most diverse multi- and interdisciplinary research. In that vein, combinations of explanations such as ‘extended self’ and ‘preservation of memory’ have been offered by, for instance, Marshall McLuhan. But what would a blend, say, of extension theory and a narrative approach look like? Or could one understand the significance of “post-mortem” digital services better from the viewpoint of our ‘materially attuned mindset’ – in the sense that, for instance, if we extend our relation with “things” into the digital realm, why not extend our coping with death into it just as well? Or what if we would combine a focus on emotional attachment to digital “collections” with the concept of anthropomorphization; for example: In being immersed in SNS, to what degree are we emotionally involved with anthropomorphized versions of digital “objects,” or with actual, “real” people? These and other, more complex combinations could found various new approaches.

The third consequence is more practical. Collecting, as noted, constitutes an immersive behavior heavily and meaningfully involved with material surroundings. If online practices exhibit a similar involvement with the handling of digital “things,” this could be a useful starting point for technological design, of hardware and software alike. Authors like Peter-Paul Verbeek (2005) and Donald Norman (1998, 2004) seem to be on a fruitful track here, linking design and technological development to the concepts of embodied cognition and our materially attuned being-in-the-world. Could we ameliorate ICT by interpreting them as “collecting” technologies, namely as exhibiting the five characteristics outlined in the first part of this paper, and of which the use is possibly grounded in one or more of the motivations for “collecting” furnished in the second part? And if so, should we stimulate a “collecting culture,” or, on the contrary, suppress it, albeit in certain aspects?

That question leads us, at last, to the fourth consequence: if online activity resembles collecting, how can we employ that point of view in an ethical consideration of online “culture”? We need to refer back here to the distinction we’ve made between “conscious” and “unconscious” online “collecting.” On the one hand, in relation to “conscious” “collecting” – i.e., collecting activities

we ourselves consciously deploy (e.g., SNS profiles) – we can ask questions such as: Do we actually want the collecting habit dominating our online lives? What will be the repercussions on our self-image? On the other hand, “unconscious” digital “collecting” – i.e., collecting practices we subscribe to but do not necessarily knowingly endorse (e.g., storage of personal data on corporate websites) – relates to discussions on privacy, surveillance, and temporal limitations on data storage. And, focusing out, finally, we can also ask whether the collecting habit has not spread from the digital realm to “culture” in general: do we not live in an age of collecting? Does our “non-online” culture perhaps long to select, order, watch, and accumulate as well? An ongoing “catalogization” and categorizing sprouts an array of compilations, book collections, “Top 999 of the 90s,” expositions, festivals, not to forget the ever-growing libraries of music, videos and TV series available at stores (thanks to DVD). Did digital technology spur this “completionist” drift? What’s certain, digital technologies gave us great availability of, or at least easier access to, all sorts of cultural products. And as a collector’s career usually starts by noticing the similarity between a couple of objects, stimulating the search for *more* like items, we culture consumers perhaps feel the need to complete too, faced with “so much.” But perhaps we should not indulge blindly our need to complete? Should we let loose sometimes, discard? “Life marches on, while collectors trail behind, carrying a shovel and a sack,” King observes (2008, p.145). Maybe we should not carry our shovel and sack with us all the time.

These are a few of the issues facing us in making sense of online and offline “collecting” practices. Collecting offers a way of orienting oneself in the world. Perhaps it can offer not only ICT users, but also researchers a way of orienting themselves in the digital realms in which they’re absorbed.

## Conclusion

In an attempt to make sense of online behavior – mailing, surfing, listening, watching, searching, bookmarking, ... – in a general way, and in search for a “culture” of online practices, we’ve observed digital activities through the lens of collecting practices. First, they resemble each other structurally. Both share the characteristics of selecting, ordering, looking, accumulating, and constructing. Second, an outline of the underlying causes of or reasons for collecting helps to put online activities in a new, different light: more than being just functional, communicative, or informational means, our digital tools furnish us with ways of building ourselves an identity, remembering our pasts, anticipating our futures, positioning ourselves towards others, and reacting against the establishment (however, perhaps, in vain). They provide us with meaningful pastimes, sometimes verging on the magical, as our (Western) world view, presumably, has always been centered on things. Notwithstanding obvious differences between “traditional” and online “collecting” – centering around the notion of materiality – the collecting paradigm not only offers explanations in line with contemporary technology and media studies, but also furnishes us with a comprehensive approach with which to understand online practices as a whole, as “online culture.” If “collecting” is what we do online, then this behavior surpasses mere communication, mere networking, mere functionality: just as “traditional” collecting, then, online “collecting” establishes a life project.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Cf. journals such as the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *Social Science Computer Review*, *New Media & Society*, *Human Communication Research*, and research projects such as the *Pew Internet & American Life Project*.
- 2 Cf. for instance the works of Don Ihde (1990, 2009) and Peter-Paul Verbeek (2005, 2008).
- 3 Cf. for example recent publications by Clay Shirky (2008), Don Tapscott (2008), Lee Siegel (2008), Mark Bauerlein (2008), and Andrew Keen (2008).