

Title: From Stamps to Sonny Angels: The Psychology Behind Collecting

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“Collecting is a fundamental aspect of human existence.” -Prof. Andrew Dillon.

Collecting is a universal hobby that transcends time, culture, and age. We all know that person in our lives with a collection of the most random and specific items, always sparking a conversation. If you don't know that person, then that might be you.

Regardless of the items, collecting is an action fundamental to the human experience. Why do we collect and what does it say about us? I fell down a deep rabbit hole pondering over this question and I am happy to share my findings with you.

An evolutionary perspective

Humans have always had an innate drive to gather. Our prehistoric ancestors spent their days collecting resources essential for survival, such as food, tools, and materials. According to a [study by anthropologist Dr. John Campbell](#), the psychological impulse to collect can be traced to these early survival mechanisms. A distinct example of the evolution of this hobby follows the discovery of the Americas and human fascination with the newfound realities. This is where collecting changed from something people needed to survive to a means of self-expression. Following the Industrial Revolution, collecting became a way to show a person's status. The rising middle class engaged in this behavior of acquiring and keeping objects of desire. Collecting evolved into an activity that offered both material and emotional value to individuals and communities alike.



Charles Darwin's Beetle Collection from the 1830s. Source: [Canadian Museum of Nature](#)

It's not weird, it's a dopamine release.

Inquiring about the psychology of collecting unveils a mosaic of motivations. [Prof. Andrew Dillon from the University of Texas at Austin](#) states that collecting serves as a form of identity expression and a means to control our environment. When we collect, whether it be currencies from around the world, postcards, or Sonny Angels, we're creating an external representation of our tastes and interests. The objects become an extension of ourselves, cementing our sense of identity and uniqueness.

Moreover, collections often trigger feelings of nostalgia, comfort, and achievement. The process of finding, acquiring, and displaying items releases dopamine, the brain's reward chemical, which fuels a sense of accomplishment and pleasure. Prof. Dillon's research highlights that this dopamine release can lead to a similar rush one might feel from achieving a goal or solving a puzzle.



Lenox Spice Village Collection posted by a Reddit user. Source: [Reddit](#)

The Benefits of Having a Collection

While some may view collecting as a harmless quirk, there are psychological benefits that extend beyond the hobby itself. An article from [Psychology Today](#) notes that collecting helps improve focus, patience, and organizational skills. For example, carefully cataloging stamps or assembling model cars requires attention to detail and discipline, traits that can benefit other areas of life.

Collecting can also foster social connections. Whether through clubs, conventions, or online communities, collectors have particular passions that can help them connect and create deeper connections with others. This social aspect can help combat loneliness and build a sense of belonging. Have you seen the events organized for comic and Pokemon card collectors? I find it so fascinating, and honestly endearing, how certain items can bring groups of so many different people together to share interests.

As the study points out, the shared enthusiasm among collectors fosters an environment where stories, tips, and rare finds become bridges for meaningful interaction.



San Antonio Collectors Expo. Source: <https://sacollectorsexpo.com/>

Despite the positive aspects, collecting can sometimes turn into an unhealthy habit. When the desire to collect becomes overwhelming and leads to excessive accumulation, it becomes hoarding. Unlike everyday collecting, hoarding often involves emotional distress and difficulty in letting things go, which can interfere with normal living spaces, social interactions, and even safety. Let's be honest, if it weren't a real issue, TLC wouldn't have made an entire show about hoarding.

Being mindful of this risk helps ensure that collecting remains a rewarding and manageable pastime.

A Collection of Thoughts

I always thought that I never had collections growing up. However, as I'm writing this article and reflecting on my collecting (borderline hoarding) habits from the past, I remembered that folder full of random sticker sheets that I would never stick to anything because I was "saving them for the perfect moment". Most of us probably had a similar folder too. Looking back at it, I never ended up using the stickers but just the fact of having those glittery sheets of plastic to flip through made me so happy.

I have always felt conflicted about saving things for special occasions. Whether that be a certain dress, a particular bottle of wine, or a unique yarn I'm waiting to find the perfect project for. I have now learned that collecting for purpose and saving for someday are two very different things. While you can create a collection to display your interests and personality, you shouldn't deprive yourself of special things to enjoy in the present. That perfect time is now.

Bonus: Random Facts

In the spirit of keeping the article short, I only added my main findings. However, here are some fun facts that could interest you.

- Most types of collectors have specific names.
 - Example: a coin collector → numismatist; a keychain collector → copoclephilist
- Art makes up some of the biggest and most expensive collections in the world.
- Angelina Jolie has a knife collection.
- Queen Elizabeth II was an avid collector of stamps and owned one of the most valuable collections in the world.
- The world's largest collection of teddy bears, housed in the Teddy Bear Museum in England, exceeds 8,000 bears.



Source: <https://www.teddybearmuseum.co.uk/the-museum>