

Social interactions and collecting practices mediated by the cyberspace: A nethnography with fountain pens collectors

Interações sociais e práticas de colecionismo mediadas pelo ciberespaço: uma netnografia com colecionadores de canetas-tinteiro

Interacciones sociales y prácticas de coleccionismo mediadas por el ciberespacio: una netnografía con coleccionistas de plumas estilográficas

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Marcos Ferasso

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2907-9133>
Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa, Portugal
E-mail: admmarcosferasso@gmail.com

Shalimar Gallon

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8830-4433>
Universidade Tecnológica Federal do Paraná, Brazil
E-mail: shalimargallon@gmail.com

Jandir Pauli

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4618-6958>
IMED Business School, Brazil
E-mail: jandir.pauli@imed.edu.br

Abstract

This research aimed to analyze the meanings that permeate collector's practices when collecting fountain pens. Based on a nethnography conducted in a social network group of collectors, interactions and interviews were carried for data collection. Main findings showed that, for the collector, the object's meanings are built on the continuous socialization of information and images about fountain pens mediated by cyberspace. These practices reinforce the meanings of being a collector and underline shared beliefs and narrow consumption patterns. Displaying the possessed objects means the acceptance ritual in a specific group and this belonging results in social recognition and reputation to the possessor. The studied virtual community is a space for resignification of collecting practices, reinforcing the sense of fellowship among members. Fear of decreasing the collection, financial problems, nostalgia, heritage, search for immortality, hobbies, possessiveness, passion, passing rituals, relatives' criticism, and constant escapes from reality were identified in these collecting practices. This research has, as main contribution to theory, is that we identified how collectors built the meaning of collecting fountain pens and socializing their pieces/histories thanks to the mediated way of meaning construction. Through the internet and specialized communities, collectors found a way of building and strengthening the meaning and their beliefs in a way that they would not do in real life.

Keywords: Meaning; Collecting practice; Fountain pen; Consumption pattern; Cyberspace.

Resumo

Esta pesquisa teve como objetivo analisar os significados que permeiam as práticas do colecionador ao colecionar canetas-tinteiro. A partir de uma netnografia realizada em um grupo de colecionadores de uma rede social, foram realizadas interações e entrevistas para coleta de dados. Os principais resultados mostraram que, para o colecionador, os significados do objeto são construídos na contínua socialização de informações e imagens sobre canetas tinteiro mediadas pelo ciberespaço. Essas práticas reforçam os significados de ser colecionador e reforçam crenças compartilhadas e padrões de consumo direcionados. Exibir os objetos possuídos significa o ritual de aceitação em um grupo específico e esse pertencimento resulta em reconhecimento social e reputação ao possuidor. A comunidade virtual estudada é um espaço de resignificação das práticas de colecionismo, reforçando o sentimento de companheirismo entre os membros. Medo de diminuir a coleção, problemas financeiros, nostalgia, patrimônio, busca pela imortalidade, hobbies, possessividade, paixão, rituais de passagem, críticas de parentes e fugas constantes da realidade foram identificados nessas práticas de colecionismo. Esta pesquisa tem, como principal contribuição para a teoria, identificar como os colecionadores construíram o sentido de colecionar canetas tinteiro e socializar suas peças/histórias graças à forma mediada de construção de sentido. Por meio da internet e comunidades especializadas, os colecionadores encontraram uma forma de construir e fortalecer o significado e suas crenças de uma forma que não fariam na vida real.

Palavras-chave: Significado; Colecionismo; Caneta tinteiro; Padrão de consumo; Ciberespaço.

Resumen

Esta investigación tuvo como objetivo analizar los significados que impregnan las prácticas de los coleccionistas al coleccionar plumas estilográficas. Con base en una netnografía realizada en un grupo de coleccionistas de una red social, se realizaron interacciones y entrevistas para la recolección de datos. Los principales hallazgos mostraron que, para el coleccionista, los significados del objeto se construyen a partir de la continua socialización de información e imágenes sobre las plumas estilográficas mediada por el ciberespacio. Estas prácticas refuerzan los significados de ser coleccionista y subrayan creencias compartidas y patrones de consumo direccionados. Exhibir los objetos poseídos significa el ritual de aceptación en un grupo específico y esta pertenencia resulta en reconocimiento social y reputación al poseedor. La comunidad virtual estudiada es un espacio de resignificación de las prácticas de coleccionismo, reforzando el sentido de fraternidad entre los miembros. En estas prácticas de coleccionismo se identificaron el miedo a la disminución de la colección, los problemas económicos, la nostalgia, el patrimonio, la búsqueda de la inmortalidad, el pasatiempo, la posesividad, la pasión, los rituales de pasaje, las críticas de los familiares y las fugas constantes de la realidad. Esta investigación ha tenido, como principal aporte a la teoría, que identificamos cómo los coleccionistas construyen el significado de coleccionar plumas estilográficas y socializan sus piezas/historias gracias a la forma mediada de construcción de significado. A través de internet y comunidades especializadas, los coleccionistas encontraron una manera de construir y fortalecer el significado y sus creencias de una forma que no lo harían en la vida real.

Palabras clave: Sentido; Práctica de colección; Pluma estilográfica; Patrón de consumo; Ciberespacio.

1. Introduction

Collecting is a human practice that goes through historical periods, a practice that has both social and psychological approaches. Considered an individual practice, the habits of keeping and organizing objects are practices permeated with *meanings*. These meaningful practices are carried out by the collector due to distinctive properties assigned to objects, transforming objects into holders of moral values, emotional memories, and cultural patterns.

For Psychoanalysis, collecting is linked to a personality's projection. As it weaves a historical thread among generations or even between childhood and adulthood, the collector creates a particular world under his control, even in a changing world. For the possessor, collecting objects allows a way to express the need for controlling and keeping good memories of an individual's past protected (Farina et al., 2006). Collecting practice is a link between a safe past and the incognito and frightening future.

Collecting objects is also a social activity that puts individuals in relations and creates particular markets. Collecting practice is a rich activity for social interactions for resignification and collective representations. These meanings are shared thanks to a complex and specific code of communication among collectors. These codes stimulate the maintenance of the meanings, reinforce a particular language capable of expressing desires, and create emotional bonds (Hoog, 2003; Cheetham, 2009).

With the advent of Information and Technology Communications – ITCs, the social practices and human relations are now influenced by such technologies. Social networks arose as fertile environments for collector's virtual engagement. The technological revolution of the Internet has made possible the meeting of individuals for the formation of virtual communities, where interactions circulate around a common unity, the collected object. The meetings around an object allow the establishment of specific codes of human coexistence, with clear limits between what is accepted and what is immoral.

Virtual communities of collectors are rich social environments for analyzing different aspects of different fields of knowledge. This study contributes to the academy by researching an austere and relevant theme by analyzing a socio-historical practice that has followed by human societies for millennia: the collecting practices mediated by new technologies that created cyberspace. In the current connected society, technology is mediating interactions between humans and objects. Netnographies bring a substantive contribution for analyzing the phenomenon of collecting in contemporary societies. Netnographies offer a new spectrum for analyzing relationships among humans, objects, and technology.

The efforts dedicated to the understanding of collecting practices are largely grounded in Psychology and Marketing. In the former, most of available studies are attentive to deviant behaviors, such as the Diogenes syndrome for object collecting

and Noah syndrome for animal collecting; as well as studies of deviant behaviors, such as the Psychosocial pathologies (Montero-Odasso et al., 2005; Soares, 2007; Stumpf & Rocha, 2010).

In the Marketing field, studies aim to understand consumer behavior and habits and, from this understanding, how companies can influence them (Almeida et al., 2014; Cavalcante et al., 2013; Farina et al., 2006; Lopes, 2010). The ethnographies applied in available virtual communities have also explored aspects that are linked to Marketing and consumer behavior research interests, such as those conducted by Zaglia (2013), Couto Junior and Santos (2011), and Hassan and Pervan (2011).

Thus, few studies have been dedicated to collecting practices considered as a cultural field, such as the research of Cavedon et al. (2007), Souza (2009), Rebs (2012), Rendeiro and Ribeiro (2012), Janeira (2006), and Barboza et al. (2011). This research intends to contribute to the cultural studies and addressed the following question: *What is the meaning that permeate collector's practices when collecting fountain pens?*

This research paper is structured, beyond this introduction, by a literature review section, followed by the research design, data presentation and discussion sections, ending with conclusion remarks and consulted references.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 A Short Fountain Pen History

Writing occupies a prominent place among man's inventions. From the cave inscriptions, passing through the Greek and Latin, writing activity has always been recognized as how to register and read, however limited to select literate people (Lambrou, 1995). The writing instruments have also changed over centuries. These writing instruments evolved from the feather dating back 900 A.D. This writing instrument was improved in 1750 with a steel nib. In 1888, Lewis Edson Waterman patented the piston system, a great innovation that gave birth of the first fountain pen, the most practical pen ever invented (Lambrou, 1995).

From 1800 to 1950, several companies emerged in the USA, in the UK, Germany, France, Italy, and Japan, contributing to the spread of fountain pens in some countries, even though the literate people were few in such period (Chaille, 2000; Lambrou, 1995). The years comprised by First and Second World Wars is considered one of the most fertile periods in fountain pen industry. The post-World War II period, the pen market was destabilized by emergence of the ballpoint pen, a disruptive innovation. In the same period, a significant expansion of education in several countries is witnessed, increasing the proportion of people able to read and write (Lambrou, 1995; Ferasso, Pinheiro & Schröder, 2017). Ballpoint pen caused the bankruptcy of several factories and the few remained entered a great crisis (Ferasso, Pinheiro & Schröder, 2017). Some pen companies adopted a survival strategic repositioning to the jewelry market, by introducing valuable raw materials (Rosler, 1993; Chaille, 2000).

The virtualization of documents and of interpersonal and commercial relations emerged. Writing migrated from pen and paper to the keyboard and computer screen, touchscreens, and smartphones, threaten fountain pen survival. The use of fountain pens in modern society changed to represents symbols and memories, used to mark events or rites of passage. Fountain pens were and are used to mark important signatures of treaties along History.

2.2 Collecting Practices

The reasons for the collector starting a collection are credited to his personality features: searching for power, association with erudite knowledge, childhood memories, prestige, or some form of control (Farina et al., 2006). Collecting practices can assume one of three possible typologies: reproductive activity (imitation due to social influences), self-attributed activity (personal desire that provides differentiation from others), or social collecting (social pressure) (Giacomin Filho,

2006). Family influences resignify the object by heritage and memories provided to its owner (Almeida et al., 2014; Belk, 2001; Hogg, 2003).

Collecting can provide pleasure, leisure, aesthetics, competition, risk, fantasy, sense of community, domination, ambition to achieve perfection or the desire to achieve immortality (McIntosh & Schmeichel, 2004; Rendeiro & Ribeiro, 2012; Hogg, 2003). The collector has a concern with the immortality of collectible object when the object comes from family heritage (Almeida et al., 2014; Belk, 2001). Thus, the collector builds his own intelligible universe representing and revealing his identity (Cavalcante et al., 2013). Collecting practices involves the emotional associations arising from nostalgia, giving to the collection a sacred status (Almeida et al., 2014; Belk, 2001; Hogg, 2003) or treasure (Belk, 2001), a reason for the collector be proud of. In summary, these practices reveal the existence of emotional relations tied to the consumption of collectible objects (Cavedon et al., 2007).

Consumption stages related to collecting practices initiate with the desire to start the collection and searching information; the planning and dating; the hunting; the acquisition; the post-acquisition; and the manipulation, exhibition, and cataloguing (McIntosh & Schmeichel, 2004). In this last phase, collector has a need to display his collections to others - even collectors or not (Barboza et al., 2011), generating a symbolic satisfaction for the exhibition need (Cavalcante et al., 2013). The collected items, when valued and recognized by other collectors, give the collector a feeling that his collection has a noble purpose (Belk, 2001; Rebs, 2012; Hogg, 2003).

The objects collecting takes place in an active, selective, and passionate way (Belk, 1995; Belk, 2001). The collector buys items and interacts with other collectors within the same collection themes, constantly speaks, read, and search information about the collection theme, and invests time and efforts in his collection (Barboza et al., 2011). The repetition of information and images with other collectors reinforces the meaning of being a collector and by sharing these beliefs and consumption patterns (Belk, 1988; Rebs, 2012).

The consumption of certain objects becomes a sign, a form of identity that collectors use to identify himself and recognize individuals with similar signs (Cavalcante et al., 2013). These signs are also used to reinforce one's own identity as well as a group identity. The possession of an object can mean the acceptance to pertain to a certain group, and this belonging generates desired social recognition (Rendeiro & Ribeiro, 2012). The collector builds his own universe based on an object or reference mark that reveals his identity (Cavalcante et al., 2013).

Reputation, both for the collector and for other group members, is attributed to the quantity, uniqueness or the more complete the collection is (Farina et al., 2006). The collector is always looking for new items, since the lack of an object is an essential condition for this search to emerge and remain (Barboza et al., 2011).

As result, collector compete with himself and with other collectors for acquiring specific pieces. The game winner enjoys a status among collectors, by adding new, better, or rarer pieces to its collection, differentiating the collection from other collectors (Belk, 1995). In this context, the option to get rid of the collection is something unimaginable for collectors. Collectors are more prone to sell or given up other things instead selling their collections. Contrarily, collectors are more prone to continue buying more and more items, and stopping collecting items is something not considered by collectors (Barboza et al., 2011).

The collector's attachment to his collection is seen as exaggerated for most people. Collecting is also considered a level of compulsion (Almeida et al., 2014; Belk 2001), and collector's behavior is based on his emotional need for replenishment (Farina et al., 2006). Attachment impacts on collector's quality of life and social relationships, besides the severity of psychiatric symptoms, considered as deviant behavior on collecting practices (Soares, 2007).

3. Research Design

This netnography was conducted through computer mediated interactions and interviews with collectors belonging to the Facebook® social network group created in 2009 by and for Portuguese speakers' collectors (Brazilians and Portuguese), named *Canetas Tinteiro & Cia*. The criteria for choosing this virtual community is grounded in Kozinets (2010), according to: a) the relevance of such community to the subject under study; b) an active, interactive, substantial, and heterogeneous community; and c) a community that allows a rich data collection.

Netnography is a method recommended for studying cultures and *online* communities (Bowler Junior, 2010; Gebera, 2008; Noveli, 2010; Ferasso, Canfield & Pauli, 2019; Jeacle, 2021; Butler, 2022), and evolved from ethnography (Gill and Worley, 2013; Lundie & Conroy, 2015). In netnography, the researcher will be able to actively participate as a community's member (Bowler Junior, 2010).

Adopted procedures were the following. The first author actively participated and interacted with the group along four months. As a fountain pen collector, first author is also member of the said group for more than seven years, previously of conducting this netnography.

According to Kozinets (2010), members of any virtual community are classified as:

- a) Newcomer: does not interact with the group and maintain superficial interest in group's activities;
- b) Not socially active: interacts constantly, but not in group's activities;
- c) Devotees: has strong interests in group's activities, but has few interactions; and
- d) Socially active: has strong interactions ties with the group and maintain strong interest in the group.

For research purposes, first author interacted with all four types of members (Kozinets, 2010) and interactions through public postings were prioritized. If a given member did not interact, then first author used Facebook's instant message tool for individual conversations, as a mean of interviewing members without any previously defined questions or script. A research protocol was used, and free and spontaneous participation of members was always requested and informed. This group had at the time of data collection, 664 members, according to the information found on its front page.

The interactions in this group resulted from a small group of socially active members. Depending on the topic under discussion, some devout and even not very socially active members expressed themselves and their opinions. Newcomers made specific self-introduction postings, followed by replies of veteran members. Occasional interviews were conducted with new and not very socially active members. Thus, the criteria for selecting group members, who were mostly socially active and devout members, were met.

Information was collected directly, recorded as the interactions took shape, and by field notes. The followed ethical criteria were of Langer and Beckman (2005): the researcher introduces himself, presents research goals, ensures reliability and anonymity to the individuals, incorporates feedbacks from the community, ponders public information (group postings) and private information (interviews), and obtains informed consent from participants. The names of participants were coded, and the numbering refers to the appearance order of member in conducted discussions. Adopted validation procedures was the member check, carried out by sending the first draft of this manuscript to the community members (Noveli, 2010).

The authors of this manuscript underline that the transcripts may present some mistakes or specificities of virtual communication that may be not in accordance with formal language. Moreover, the interactions were carried in Portuguese, and the transcripts were adapted in a way of preserving the content as much as possible.

4. Results

The member wishing to join the studied virtual community sends a request that is approved or rejected by moderators. Some of new members introduce themselves to the group, adopting a certain ritual comprising self-introduction, presentation

of his collection (by images and texts), or even posting requests for general information on the theme of the community.

It was noticed the involvement that newcomers already have with their collection items, and the willingness of veterans in sharing tips on how to start or increase the collection. As shown in the post of Member 12: *'[...] friends, first of all, thank you for accepting [me] into the group. I would like to know which pen and ink you recommend for those who want to start in the art'*. Member 13 presented his collection: *'hi guys, I'm new to the group and I'd like to present my Parker collection: as for the rest of the collection, I'll leave it to present at another time! I hope you like it'*.

The reasons that led members to join this virtual community are to learn from information exchange, updating about new models and brands, approaching to other collectors, and sharing tips and experiences from experts. As report by Member 24: *'I joined this excellent group in mid-2012 in order to exchange information, get to know new models, brands, and their peculiar characteristics and also to be able to give my opinion on some issues'*. Activities performed by collectors reinforced the symbolism of being a collector, underlined the importance of sharing these patterns of consumption and the attributed meanings to the fountain pen collecting shared by these community members (Freitas & Leão, 2012; Barboza et al., 2011; Belk, 1988; Rebs, 2012).

The interactions proved to be relevant for influencing the direction the collection took for the collectors who were still in the early stages of collecting practices. Member 30 reported: *'By joining this magnificent group, addiction has increased exponentially, with the exchange of information'*. Member 64 corroborated: *'[...] for me, the entrance in the group changed a lot the direction of my collection'*.

The existence of a focus for the collections is also considered a way of 'never completing' perspective. Most members stated that the criteria for establishing this focus are the most diverse, ranging from technical criteria of pens to manufacturers brands. Member 19 illustrated that: *'I, as a bit of a nuts, sold two pens that did not have the profile of the collection I want. I'm focusing on medium/large pens with M-nib and black/blue/red colors. Does anyone else do it or am I the only one crazy? LOL'*. Member 31 reported his brand focus: *'[...] well, I believe I am currently focused on Montblanc'*. According to Lopes (2010), collectors civilize themselves based on the collection, which goes from the individual to the social. These objects are ordered and transmuted through the communication that occurs among individuals. Moreover, the limits of diversifying collected objects are explained by social practices or even according to their life cycle.

Collectors are always looking for new items, since the lack of an object is essential for the search to remain (Barboza et al., 2011). Member 39 showed: *'I still don't have systematization in my set of pens. I'm on the hunt for new models that surpass in writing experience those I already have'*. Member 22 reported his focus: *'[...] for my collection, I fix only on the fountain pens manufactured from 2014 backwards LOL'*. The fine line between the pleasure of collecting and the pathological behavior of infinite obsession for having a greater diversity of objects was also highlighted. In fact, in several snippets from the posts, the perspective of 'collection never ends' was noticed, indicating that the object itself seems to strike back to the individual.

Some members demonstrated certain obsession with their collections. Member 4 reported: *'A good part of [the] great friendships I have built were the result of this passion'*. Member 21 wrote: *'It was there [in the group] that I became interested in getting to know this writing instrument better and I fell in love about using it and collecting it, rescuing this part of my story'*. This feeling is common among collectors who call collectible objects of desire a passion, which is aligned with Barboza et al. (2011) considering that collecting practice is a form of passionate consumption.

Collecting is sometimes treated among collectors as 'addiction', fever, something abnormal, fissure, trap or even madness and, ironically, as fetishism or 'viruses'. This context is exemplified in Member 53's question: *'[...] how does someone "detox" from "addiction" in an advanced state of fountain pens [use] and only use ink in inkwell because it has more tradition? Does he use BIC and pencil until "getting better"?''*. The comment of Member 40 is also aligned: *'I've been*

contaminated by pen fever and now I can't see one in a window shop that I immediately want to own it'.

The exaggeration in collecting is also noticed when the collector saves money to spend on items for the collection, as showed by Member 25: *'I won a knowledge contest at my school, which pocketed me R\$100.00 and I decided that I should buy another pen. That's when I bought a promotional package with two Crown Capricci, one black and one silver, I'm loving them too. Now, I'm saving my allowance to buy a Parker Vector Ivory and a Sheaffer Javelin'.* In another case, the escape to 'a fantasy world' is illustrated, denoting a need to escape from reality (Slater, 1998). Member 49 showed this situation as follows.

The fountain pen brings me a memory, a return to the past in which I was well, physically speaking. Yesterday, 6/18, I bought from Fernando, a MB [Montblanc] from the 1950s. I was very depressed, because of everything I'm living. From physical losses that I am having and the limitations that have been occurring, because of these losses. But the pen takes me to a fantasy world, a world in which I don't think about how I am, but about how good it is to write with it. Whether it's a Parker, MB or Sheaffer, for example, it's a fountain pen, and it represents the history of writing. And because of my illness, I have tremors in my hands, and I write much better with a fountain pen than with a ballpoint pen. The line, its outline is better, firmer.

This interaction is aligned with the scape need (Farina et al., 2006), also causing a devotion or addiction or compulsion (Almeida et al., 2014; Belk, 2001). Thus, the emotional need for replenishment (Farina et al., 2006) is fulfilled by this fugue from reality of Member 49, even though considered irrational for mostly people (Belk, 1988). The needs identified by Farina et al. (2006) are usually met through collecting, such as the satisfaction provided by the drug to its chemical addicted.

Collectors reported having suffered prejudices in their family, work, or friends' circles. This is illustrated by Member 4: *'My beautiful wife always says: "[Member 4], you're annoying!" And she's probably right. I've been collecting pens since my fourteen years. It's made me annoy in this matter'.* Member 47 reports that he uses BIC's ballpoint pens to avoid bullying: *'[...] even at work, which causes a certain amount of anger when I talk about the price of some of them. And it's not even close to the Mont Blanc's. In college, I don't stop using them, and I'm careful with BICs'.* Collectors suffer prejudices from social circles due they consider some types of collection a waste of money and time (Barboza et al., 2011).

Moreover, collectors sometimes go into debt or set financial limits when buying collectible items, and sometimes stop buying essential items to the detriment of collection items just to satisfy their desires, emotions and pleasure provided by the collecting practice (Barboza et al., 2011). Member 2 reported his rational choices: *'I like pens and spend money on them, but always within limits that I consider rational for myself'.* Member 22 agreed: *'I've also set a monthly [spending] limit and a limit to be paid in a pen. To exceed it, only if it is something very justifiable and I will not have another chance to have it'.*

The concern for the future of the collections emerged in discussions. Some collectors are already thinking about passing on the collections to future generations, along the lines of what would be an intangible testament. This concern finds its basis in the individual search for immortality (Almeida et al., 2014; Belk, 2001; Rendeiro & Ribeiro, 2012). Member 11 reported: *'I confess I am worried about the future of my collection after my departure [death]'.* Member 24 added:

I want my pens, which will most likely have more life than me, to be perpetuated in the family as my legacy. I want someday someone to remember with them who I was and to be able to say: "that pen was my father's", or my uncle's, and I want them to feel as proud of using them as I do of those of my late grandfather.

Member 2 complemented: *'[...] the problem with leaving something for posterity is that usually children and grandchildren don't give a damn about those weird "manias". Anyway, I've decided that after I leave, I won't worry anymore about these collections of mines and will start collecting clouds and stars'.* Member 29, on the other hand, is warned: *'[...] at my home, everyone knows the value and they won't put it away when I leave. You have to take, see, feel. My daughter wants to stay [with the collection] when I leave. Marcel [Proust, a limited edition of Montblanc], I already gave to my stepson. The*

others, I don't know what [the wife] will do. I want to see the fight. And I'll be laughing LOL'.

In this context, when members were asked whether, at any point, they had considered disposing of the collection, the answers were practically unanimous: they would not dispose of the collection, corroborating with the assumptions of Barboza et al. (2011). Member 9 posted: *'never!'*. Member 4 reported: *'[...] this question is almost an offense... LOL... Joking... No'*. Member 29 complemented: *'[...] it depends: if I would need to sell for money, no doubt. You don't sell like that, on the spot, but I would sell [to buy higher-value editions]'*. Those who declared the willingness of selling would be to buy more expensive items or to invest the money in other collections that would attract them more. Even knowing the possibility of acquiring pieces for the collection as an investment, the financial valuation of the collection by adding pieces is not the goal of purchasing for these collectors.

Member 72 added: *'I have already thought about getting rid of myself for financial reasons, but I have given up. I'm very jealous of my pens!'*. Only one member reported that he would sell his collection to help financially any family member who might be in need, as declared by Member 63: *'Yes, it happened to me, I sold the vast majority of my pens and today I have a small watch collection'*.

Many members considered themselves collectors and understand the concept of being a collector. For Member 37, *'[...] though few, I consider myself one'*. However, Member 17 related collecting to quantity and variety of pieces: *'I think a collector is one who seeks to have several pens of one model, possessing caps, colors, nibs [sizes] of the most diverse types. For example, I have 20 Sheaffer snorkels, I have several colors, nibs, different caps'*. Member 49 reinforced: *'[Member 17], I think, is more of a collector than me, but so am I. Despite a minimum number of pens, I consider myself a collector of them. Of course, a collector, who doesn't even reach the feet of [Member 17], [Member 4], [Member 27] and others here in the group'*. The fact that the community member claims to be a collector, in some way, and belonging to the community gives, to the member, a group identity and reinforces the collector's own identity.

As cited by collectors, the reasons to start the collection are related to aesthetics, symbolism (learning to write or improve handwriting), presents in rites of passage (graduations), hobbies (leisure), and heritage (symbolism and memory of ancestors or relatives). These reasons are based on the concepts of specific consumer culture, where a collection begins either by prestige or symbolism (Cavalcante et al., 2013); or on the criteria of McIntosh and Schmeichel (2004) and Rendeiro and Ribeiro (2012), or by the search for item's immortality as family heritage (Almeida et al., 2014; Belk, 2001).

The influence of family heritage that the item provides to its owner (Almeida et al., 2014; Belk, 2001) is presented in the discourse of Member 9: *'[...] my grandfather used P51 [Parker 51] a lot, and this makes me want to know more and more about this pen'*. Member 25 also related this family influence: *'It all started when I was eight [years old], when my mother gave my father a fountain pen and I thought it was amazing that it was a bit exotic'*.

Collecting is an intense and engaging form of consumption, and the collector acquires and retains items that refer him to nostalgia. The possession of the item gives him/her this nostalgic feeling that is relieved by the memory (Almeida et al., 2014; Farina et al., 2006; Rendeiro & Ribeiro, 2012), corroborating with the existence of emotional relationships linked to the consumption of collectible objects (Cavedon et al., 2007). The comment of Member 9 is aligned with this context: *'[...] my father taught me and teaches me how to charge my fountain pens, taught me how to write with them. My relationship with fountain pens is a family affair, I bought them because my grandfather used them. And it's very nice to write with a pen that reminds you of the past, I've been imagining, 40 years ago, my grandfather and his Parker 51'*.

The testimony of Member 62 showed the past experiences that marked the life of an individual (Lopes, 2010). Moreover, it showed the advertising influences of some fountain pen manufacturers to stimulate collecting. Influences from sellers - marketing influences - whose goal is the commercialization of such items were also identified (Amaral et al., 2008; Broillet & Dubosson, 2008; Ismail et al., 2010; Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets, 2006).

My grandmother had a collection of Reader's Digest Selections since the 1950s. In these magazines, there were always ads of Parker or Sheaffer pens. Beautifully colored, explanatory advertisements featuring the fountain pens, especially the Parker 51 as wonderful objects. This created a curiosity for them from my early childhood, and a desire to own them, but I felt that due to the many decades of advertising gone by, there were no more Parker or Sheaffer pens for sale. However, the Internet appeared, and with it, the possibility of making a dream come true: to acquire those pieces, which since childhood I wanted to have. (Member 62).

Member 29 noted: *'[...] many buy MB because of little star [status sign] and to exhibit it [exhibitionism]. For us [collectors], there is another meaning. What's worth it is the passion for the nib [referring to fountain pens]'*. However, Member 8 showed the concern with status: *'[...] one thing I think is helping to bring back the fountain pen, is a kind of counterpoint, a 'counter-culture' of the disposable. Abandon part of what is disposable. Fountain pens, more than just writing instruments, they are art and beauty'*. Member 34 also showed this status concern: *'I won a Bohème ballpoint for graduation, but with the stone in Onyx. The green color is related to Medicine more in Brazil because it is the color associated with the Medical School of USP [University of Sao Paulo]. This faculty is older than USP itself and, because it has a lot of influence, the idea has spread'*.

Other comments pointed out the relationship between the profession and the fountain pen, because *'[...] the professionals who most like fountain pens are the physicians, they keep showing off, for the patients to remember to gift them thanks to a successful treatment'* (Member 37). However, Member 29 noted: *'[...] there is not always the pen-profession link',* but *'[...] mister Montblanc is Brazilian, a physician and the biggest collector in the world'*.

Several interactions revealed that the typology assumed by investigated collectors were the reproductive activity (by imitation due to social influences) (Giacomin Filho, 2006). According to Member 21: *'[...] at school, I observed the priests using them, I noticed that people with high cultural background in childhood times were common. I began to learn about them and ended up falling into the trap'*.

Collecting practice can be manifest in critical phases of an individual's life, mostly in childhood, where the individual uses the collection to communicate, build or redefine his *self* (Baudrillard, 2006). The extension of the *self* is when the person also becomes what he sees in the extension of possessed objects, and these objects become meanings of being and making of the collector (Almeida et al., 2014; Belk, 2001; Farina et al., 2006). As underlined by Member 27: *'[...] pieces that today are part of my life history'*.

The collectors get involved in face-to-face meetings to get to know each other and, especially, to know the collections of each other personally (Barboza et al., 2011). As reported by Member 11: *'[...] very good to meet personally the colleagues of our group, let's see if in October this intensifies [referring to the pen shows that occur in October]'*. These events provide a symbolic satisfaction for the need for exhibition (Cavalcante et al., 2013). However, collectors who hold expensive pieces prefer to remain anonymous or even hide their collections because of fear. This concern is showed by Member 29: *'I have friends from Sao Paulo who do not expose themselves, nor in pen show. They are afraid'*.

Although Member 29 underlined that one cannot *'[...] make the group as a stage for exhibitionism or even a trampoline for ostentation [...]'*, the exhibition of collections is held in the community. In the consumption stage of manipulation, exhibition and cataloguing of collected items (McIntosh & Schmeichel, 2004), the collectors created a propitious environment for exhibiting their collections and, as a virtual environment, these would be the locus for exhibiting such collections and maintaining memories (Rendeiro & Ribeiro, 2012).

The display of one's object may mean inclusion in a certain group, and this membership generates certain social recognition to the possessor (Rendeiro & Ribeiro, 2012). Therefore, there is a resignification of social practices (the collecting) to places that are absent from the physical element (cyberspace, virtual communities). Therefore, the collections in cyberspaces assume an even greater symbology than those that carry their essence in the concrete: besides the symbolic value, the material

value is lost, causing a temporal, virtual and situational valuation, linked to the condition of the virtual locus that allows the visualization of such collections (Rebs, 2012).

The studied community has members who have specialized in some manufacturers and have a reputation in the group according to their degree of knowledge or the features of their collection. These experts are constantly consulted by members who seeks more information about pens or manufacturers. Member 48 asked for an opinion: *'[...] guys, I need a consultation: I want to buy a Parker Frontier, do you recommend me the "made in USA" or the "made in the UK"? Thank you'*. Member 42 answered: *'[...] excellent! More information with our Montblancmaniacs [Member 31], [Member 39] and [Member 4]'*.

Consumption of certain objects is a form of identity that the collector uses to identify himself and others (Cavalcante et al., 2013). For this purpose, the preferences for certain manufacturers' brands are recurrent, as brands can redefine the *self*, as well as give *status* to the collector. Thus, interactions in this virtual community have helped its members to build their *persona*, through social influences (family, friends), but also through interactions with the group (other collectors) (Cavalcante et al., 2013).

In the literature about collecting practices, the owner of the admired object usually does not use it for the proper purpose for which the object was acquired (Barboza et al., 2011; Belk, 1988; Belk, 1995), because the collector focuses on the control of objects and their possession. Contrarily to this statement, in the case of fountain pens, there is a preference of using the fountain pens rather than leaving them in storage. As reported by Member 16: *'[...] my pens, today and in the future, will all be used, periodically, none will remain on the shelf or in the box, untouched, sterile. I do not feel passion in the mere possession, keeping and displaying of writing instruments. For me, the use is vital. My pleasure is only completed with the daily use of these objects'*.

To test the theoretical precept regarding the collector's decision in not using the admired object (Barboza et al., 2011; Belk, 1988; Belk, 1995), the first author published Figure 1 in the group. The figure shows two Montblanc pens with diamond-studded and considered top-ten most expensive pens in the world, with the following comment: *'How to hold more than USD3 millions with only two fingers'*. The collectors' reactions corroborated with the assumption of using the collected object accordingly with its purpose, contradicting theoretical assumptions. As showed by Member 4: *'[...] this is not a pen but a jewel. If I was really rich, I would buy it on eBay, put it in my pocket and keep parading it up and down LOL'*. This statement also showed the negative perspective of collections exhibition when narcissistic or exhibitionist behavior emerges.

Figure 1 - Two Montblanc pens made with diamonds



Source: Taken from Branchini (2020).

Member 49 positioned himself on the post of Figure 1: *'You may consider me an imbecile, but I prefer to have, a Mont Blanc fountain pen or some other brand, but simpler and more socially usable than a jewel to stay in the vault'*. Member 4 agreed: *'Does anyone write with an earring? Does anyone write with a diamond ring? No. Yeah, this is what you're seeing in the picture, though it looks like a pen, isn't it? It's a jewel. And jewels are to be admired'*. Member 49 exposed his perception: *'I'd rather have a Mont Blanc, a Pelikan, Parker 51, all beautiful and 'usable', lovely and admirable!'*.

All empirical experience demonstrated that most of the interactions that occur in this virtual community deal with the exhibition of collections (in whole or in part), exhibition of new acquisitions, exhibition of pen accessories. Moreover, collectors exchange technical and quality information about models and fountain pens brands, nib types, types of inks available in the market, stores, and reliable websites for purchasing (which refers to the search for items, accessories, and supplies).

Collectors also use the virtual community to share information on writing accessories (such as papers or notebooks), tips on what kind of pen to buy (for those who wish to start or expand their small collections), pens storage accessories (such as boxes, displays or cases). They also share news related to new models of pens or brands novelties, products and procedures for pen cleaning, information on counterfeit products and on restoration of old pens.

These interactions are usually followed with photographs, videos, links to websites and blogs external to Facebook group. These interactions resignify the activities of this virtual community, as well as the owners' collections. It is these interactions that allow collectors to show their 'addictions', narcissistic sides, yearnings, frustrations, joys, as well as to complete their collections with accessories and objects.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The evolution of writing instruments changed the routine of the whole structure of human relations. Taking this path into consideration, this nethnography aimed to analyze the meaning of an object for its collector. Empirical findings showed that the meanings for collecting lie in the continuous socialization of information and images, which reinforce the meaning of being a collector and the importance of sharing these beliefs and consumption patterns.

The display of possessed object means inclusion in a certain group, and this belonging generates social recognition to the possessor. To this end, the virtual environment has made possible the resignification of the collecting practice by allowing the collections visualization and interactions among collectors (Rebs, 2012).

Pens have a very strong cultural value because they are related to aesthetic and symbolic factors, gifts for rites of passage, hobbies, and heritage, which are based on the consumer culture of modern society. Either by prestige, symbolism, or by the search for the immortality of the collectible object, the collector tends to link the collected item to a family heritage. There are members who had their passions for fountain pens aroused by the curiosity of this writing instrument (technical aspects of the fountain pen), or even those who were influenced by advertisements or vendors (marketing influences).

However, the influences of ancestors stood out as one of the strongest reasons that led members to keep their collections, associated with the fact that the pen was used to mark an important moment in individual's life, whether through gifts or other passing rituals - such as graduations or the act of learning to write. Therefore, most community members had social influences and imitated the use of instruments made by ancestors to preserve alive the memory of nostalgic moments, or to keep alive the memory of beloved ones who are no longer among them.

This research is also attentive to the exclusivity character that maintain the group. These very specific interactions may be a risk of isolating the group from the macrosocial environment. This condition, typically possible since the advent of virtual social networks, often creates 'bubbles' that detach group members from social dynamics and often strikes back against the group itself with repertoires that put in check the ideals of democratic coexistence. This context was visualized when Member 38 posted a text in which the group assumed a fellowship status, just as it would be in other groups whose members

are strongly linked by an ideal. Thus, it is timely to understand the resignifications of virtual groups and the impact on social lives of individuals, especially with the virtualization of professional and social relationships.

This research has, as main contribution to theory, is that we identified how collectors built the meaning of collecting fountain pens and socializing their pieces/histories thanks to the mediated way of meaning construction. Through the internet and specialized communities, collectors found a way of building and strengthening the meaning and their beliefs in a way that they would not do in real life.

Finally, this research showed that virtual communities are a rich field for analyzing different research subjects in various domains. Thus, it is suggested to research the meaning of other collectible objects, as well as conducting research on social networks to understand the reasons that lead individuals to join virtual communities aiming collecting practices reinforcements.

It is recommended future research focusing on netnography methodology and collecting practices in other domains (like other collected objects and other social networks) and to compare with the findings of this research to achieve better understanding on how cyberspace is shaping the collecting practices in the current society. Regarding to the collecting practices, it is recommended future research for understanding the meaning and beliefs behind other collecting practices and how social networks and cyberspace are reinforcing such practices.

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