The 'dizziness' of accumulation: How digital collecting is undermining the very meaning of collection

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ABSTRACT

Much of the previous research on collecting focuses on the resemantization of the object/item when inserted into a series that 'releases' it from its functionality and makes it an extension of the subject (Baudrillard 1968; Leone 2015). Digital collecting, however, essentially undermines the relationship between the collector and their collection, especially with the potentially endless accumulation allowed by the digital medium and the possibility it provides to gather items without actually owning them. The criterion of scarcity/rarity that used to prevail in traditional collecting is now replaced by a principle of abundance (Denegri-Knott et al. 2012), potentially opening new forms of ephemerality and meaninglessness. More specifically, these latter arise in connection to feelings of *dispossession* and *uncontrollability* that many collectors experience concerning their digital possessions, especially when stored online (Odom et al. 2012). And yet, new collecting practices can emerge, driven by the desire to share the content and with greater attention to its curation. Reframing these practices within a culture characterized by *hyper-archivability* (Brown and Hoskins 2010) and the fluid time of *micro-archives* (Pogačar 2016), the present contribution tries to shed some light on (some of) the contemporary trends in collecting, revealing all their ambiguity and the eventual return of the specter of illegality.

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1. Introduction. When collections *fail*

Collections are usually linked to permanence and ownership, yet this is only part of the truth. In considering collecting, two episodes come to my mind, and both are linked to feelings of loss and dispossession. My most recent memory concerns the disappearance, for copyright reasons, of a *city pop* playlist I saved on YouTube;[1] that playlist contained a song I particularly liked, but I could not remember its title in Japanese. It took me weeks to finally retrieve it – and save its title for every eventuality. The second memory concerns retrieving a VHS tape, one of the few 'survivors' from my family's collection, consisting of original and recordable VHS cassettes. More precisely, that moment of re-discovery was when I started conceiving of those long-forgotten VHS tapes as a *collection*. And yet, even that experience of re-appropriation was intensely charged with a feeling of loss- since I can no longer play any of those VHS tapes, towards which I have developed an unexpectedly strong attachment.

These two episodes reveal some obvious points related to collections: the nostalgia that arises from items of yesteryear, their personal and subjective meaning, or their ability to evoke memories, as in the second episode. However, as with the first example in particular, some more neglected aspects emerge, too: first of all, the meaning of 'collection' in the digital age seems to be less stable than in the past. Secondly, and partially related to it, collections often *fail*, leading to a feeling of uncertainty and, eventually, of meaninglessness. Finally, collections are becoming less and less personal because their content is increasingly shared with others, and, more significantly, they often originate from items not owned by the collector (as with YouTube playlists) or whose possession is perceived as potentially compromised. These are the aspects the present article deals with, particularly the changes introduced by digital collections compared to the previous collecting practices. It also explores how these changes relate to the culture of hyper-archivability (Brown and Hoskins 2010; Pogačar 2016, 2017) that characterizes our present time. Reframing collecting into this broader context, which includes a series of cultural and economic transformations, is essential for understanding the social aspects of this practice, too often overshadowed by a subject-centered perspective.

[1] *City pop* is a very broad genre of Western-influenced music that emerged in Japan in the 1970s.

2. Collecting without owning? How the digital medium is challenging our understanding of collections

Returning to the two episodes that open this article, it may be argued that a playlist saved on YouTube and a series of VHS tapes do not constitute examples of collections properly. Following Watkins, Sellen, and Lindley (2015: 3423), 'genuine' collections should be defined as "groups of acquired possessions with distinct characteristics, including clearly identified boundaries, selectiveness, and perceived unity." According to the authors, however, the notion of 'collection' tends to be far more generic in the case of digital content, often encompassing a variety of items that an individual simply accumulates. Indeed, a playlist on YouTube comprises tracks not owned by the user, so the aforementioned criterion of ownership/possession is not met. Yet, people commonly talk about 'collections' (or even 'archives') of online playlists or personal photos, even if they meet none or barely any of the distinct characteristics listed by the authors above.

On the other hand, the aforementioned VHS tapes are actually owned, acquired over the years. However, they are not the result of a selective acquisition process, do not claim to form a unity, and do not exhibit distinct boundaries, belonging to very different genres, times, and styles. In addition, as already outlined, they are regarded as a collection only in retrospect, when their belonging to a former age and technology makes them objects of desire. The encounter between a lost technology, which makes the VHS tapes 'inaccessible' in their content, and the memories that they nonetheless evoke triggers a different perception of them in the present, determining the passage from accumulated to collected objects.[2]

To sum up, and for reasons that we will clarify throughout the article, the criteria that Watkins, Sellen, and Lindley listed for defining a collection seem somewhat problematic, particularly regarding digital collecting, which introduces a series of issues and concerns previously peripheral or absent from traditional collections. It should be said, however, that these latter have usually proved challenging to define since, despite the general agreement on the importance of selecting the items to be collected, this process may be driven by a certain unawareness (Pearce 1994). According to Pearce, a collection may be recognized as such only later, but, more importantly, "a collection is not a collection until someone thinks of it in those terms" (ibid.: 158). Such clarification is particularly interesting for a semiotic understanding of collecting and evokes Eco's definition of traces as signs only after they have been recognized as such by someone (Eco 1975).

[2] The belonging of an object/item to the past is obviously not a necessary condition for it to be regarded as a collectible; there is, however, no doubt that goods evocative of former times are especially treasured by collectors, and that they tend to see their value multiply over time.

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The importance of the recognition process in determining what we can define as a collection, as well as its *displacement* over time, problematizes the principle of selection upon which the difference between accumulating and collecting is usually based. As Pearce (1994) highlighted, the boundaries between these two practices are often blurred since they depend on individual interpretations that vary over time. In addition, the distinction has become ever more complex within the digital realm, where the potentially endless accumulation of items can easily lead to an overabundance of elements, threatening the integrity of the collection (its aforementioned 'distinct boundaries'). The principle of abundance has emerged in some analyses (Denegri-Knott et al. 2012; Odom et al. 2012 in relation to collecting digital possessions). Abundance tends to replace the previously dominant principle of *scarcity/rarity* that prompted pre-digital collections since items generally accumulate at a greater speed and quantity (Denegri-Knott et al. 2012: 85).

For Mardon and Belk (2018), the criterion of scarcity, redefined in terms of *elusiveness*, is threatened in digital collecting: items become "abundant, ubiquitous and infinitely replicable" (548), forcing some companies to design and market them as collectibles and, eventually, as limited editions to restore their desirability (and, it may be added, their significance). According to the authors, the item/object's elusiveness is linked to both the 'thrill of the hunt' and the 'thrill of the find,' with the first referring to the active search for an item while the second to its unexpected discovery. In short, these two modes of collecting are governed by what is here defined as predetermination, if not actual desire, and randomness, respectively. However, are these modes likely to be encountered only in traditional collecting? Whereas Mardon and Belk raise some doubts about the effectiveness of companies' strategies to induce similar feelings in digital collecting, it is possible to affirm that predetermination and randomness do not disappear with digital abundance. Indeed, the elusiveness of an item may be just as easily induced (more than 'real') in the case of non-digital collections, and it largely depends on the emotional investment that we usually attach to the materiality of an object (and its perceived perishability). Moreover, since it is possible to collect material items on the Internet with varying degrees of rarity, the 'thrill of the hunt' can also reemerge in the digital space; surfing websites simply replace the previous practices of wandering around flea markets or vintage shops. As summarized by Roy (2015: 168-169):

> Digital collecting does not necessarily eradicate more traditional collecting practice. Indeed, the internet might even paradoxically reinforce object-based collecting practices. On the one hand, it enables the digitization of pre-existing material music objects. On the other hand, it enables the circulation and re-dissemination of the material culture of music, notably through online second-hand markets. It can thus reinforce place-based and object-centred collecting practices […]. As such, digitization does not suspend the circulation of material objects in the world.

Predetermination and desire, therefore, also rule in collecting on the Internet, with no less skill and knowledge required than for acquiring material items in 'physical spaces.' In both cases, the collector must move quicker than others to appropriate items before anyone else or before they run out. But desire may also reemerge from the experience of loss, which is far from impossible even in the realm of digital abundance and ubiquity, as already anticipated above. Finding out that a cherished song recklessly saved to a playlist on YouTube is lost or deleted because of copyright issues engenders a renewed desire: I know I can find it again, and yet if its title or some of the song's words have been forgotten, retrieving it may prove to be a long process, filled with failed attempts. Some of the people interviewed by Bergman, Whittaker, and Tish (2022) about their music consumption in streaming applications report that they often forget the titles of songs they listened to, resulting in 'music loss' over time. The different accessibility allowed by streaming services and the possibility of constantly searching for a song again affect how we consume music. This implies that users, even those who describe themselves as music enthusiasts, often choose not to collect. According to the authors, many listeners usually neglect what they temporarily save to playlists, this being one of the possible consequences of music streaming.

On the other hand, the experience of randomness, or the 'thrill of the find' in Mardon and Belk (2018), is not precluded by digital abundance and pre-set contents. For example, with music streaming, it emerges that, contrary to "the (digital) ownership model, when consumers purchase and download specific music titles," and "an additional variety is costly" (Datta, Knox, and Bronnenberg 2017: 5-6), in the streaming model, variety is either free or included in the subscription paid to the service – as in the case of Spotify, for example. The increased variety of music users have access to allows for "the discovery of new favorites or upward selection" (17), meaning that the same value of discovery simultaneously increases. In this sense, it is evident that the experience of finding new music is not predetermined and that there is always some space for randomness and the excitement it produces in the listeners. Nevertheless, feelings of dissatisfaction may always arise, mainly because users are aware that algorithms determine their future explorations of music:

> These algorithms can be referred to as "social machines" as their preference recommendations include collaborative filtering. There is a great deal of recent societal concern that news and social media algorithms induce "filter bubbles" where people are constantly exposed to a narrow set of views that reflect their own perspectives. In addition, artists can attempt to influence the algorithm to expose their songs to more listeners by reducing the royalty fees. (Bergman, Whittaker and Tish 2022: 124-125)

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Such feelings of dispossession may easily lead to what the authors define as the l*oss of collector's joy*, which depends on several factors, including the abundance mentioned above that makes everything immediately and effortlessly available and the loss of information about the music accessed, as the streaming service does not always provide this. To sum up, the 'thrill of the find' may not disappear when it comes to digital content, but it is indeed threatened by the perception that total randomness, which made the experience of collecting so exciting, cannot be fully achieved.

The case of music streaming highlights some of the dynamics and changes introduced by digital collecting while simultaneously undermining the criteria identified by Watkins, Sellen, and Lindley (2015) presented at the beginning of the paper. As we demonstrated, collections can exist without being owned/acquired by the collector; they may arise beyond or outside a selective process and be barely perceived as a unified whole. Finally, they may also lack any identifiable boundaries: in particular, music collections created within streaming applications show how the lines between what is internal and what is external to a collection are blurred (Bergman, Whittaker, and Tish 2022).[3] Personalized playlists consolidate both the music dispersion that asserts itself in the contemporary age and what Carlos Scolari defines as snack culture (see Fernández 2022: 17), i.e., a culture characterized by increasing fragmentation and brevity. In this context, the previously valued principles of scarcity/rarity and exclusive ownership of an item tend to decay. However, individuals who used to (or still do) have collections of material items are more likely to hold on to those principles. Collecting digital music (like MP3 files) entails a shift from an object fetishized in its uniqueness and rarity (as in the case of vinyl records) to what Roy (2015: 168) calls the "fetishization of speed," which privileges flux and accumulation over ownership. This process is central in music streaming, where we create and preserve playlists subject to our willingness to care for them over time, choosing among different practices between the two extremes of static and dynamic approaches (Hagen 2015).

The central aspect that music streaming brings out is that the digital format allows for collecting without owning, to the point that collectors may eventually be 'erased' from their selections, as Roy (2015), developing Fletcher's observations, suggests. But flux and accumulation tend to replace not only the principle of ownership or the uniqueness/rarity of the item but also another criterion that was central in the creation and understanding of collections: the *ordering* of the items that constitute them, whether driven by the internal coherence of the selection or more intimate reasons like the collector's personal history. The first aspect is usually what a semiotic analysis of collecting

[3] Among the criteria listed by Watkins, Sellen and Lindley, it is possible to add also the principle of uniqueness, meaning both that collections tend to avoid any duplicates (each item only occurs once) and that authenticity (the unique/original item or first release) is especially valued by collectors, even if consumer goods and replicas often turn into collectibles. This aspect will be analyzed more in detail below.

is concerned with since it implies the resemantization of the items collected, as they lose their use value in favor of an aesthetic one. The aesthetic character of the item, and more generally of the practice of collecting, stems precisely from its move away from social functioning to having a different meaning attributed to it (Leone 2015: 676). However, this process of resemantization is usually connected to the second aspect mentioned above, i.e., the biographical dimension acquired by the collection. As already noted by Baudrillard (1968), while entering into a relationship through which they (re)define themselves, collected items refer to the subject to the point that their resemantization through ordering and classification appears to be inseparable from the collector's desire, or passion, identified by Baudrillard as the predominant feeling in collecting.

Nevertheless, both ordering (and the internal coherence deriving from it) and the possibility for the subjects to identify themselves in the collection tend to erode in the digital realm. This is not only due to the aforementioned possibility of not owning the items collected but also to the difficulty in managing increasingly large volumes of data, as well as the feeling of uncertainty regarding their actual lifespan and control. On the one hand, the almost indiscriminate accumulation of digital items allowed by storage devices, including online services like Cloud, ensures a safer preservation of these 'intangible' collections; on the other hand, a different understanding of ownership develops when users entrust their collections to these storage devices (Odom et al. 2012). The authors seem to confirm the observations made by van Dijck (2007) on how, especially for younger generations, preserve/archive and share (online) tend to overlap, a trend confirmed by their "less developed practices for organizing files locally" (Odom et al. 2012: 5). This may suggest that, for younger users, digital content is generally perceived as more fluid and, as a consequence, that collecting does not necessarily rely on a strong sense of ownership or, eventually, of stability.[4]

The difficulty in curating digital possessions and how online sharing or storage changed the understanding of ownership have introduced some concerns, like the actual control of the content, that were probably unknown in traditional collecting. Feelings of uncertainty, if not actual *dispossession*, have emerged, along with a revived perception of ephemerality that no longer derives from the object's aging or decay. Whereas deterioration affects analog media and their video/sound quality, digital media do not properly age: they are unaffected by the progressive degeneration through which vinyl records or VHS tapes 'reveal the memory' of their use since files are simply accessible or inaccessible, readable or unreadable. A few years ago, a great debate around the lifespan of digital formats and storage media arose, focusing, among other things, on the issue of their future preservation. The readability

[4] For Baudrillard (1968: 135), collections attempt to transcend 'real' time into a systematic dimension (une dimension systématique); it may be possible to affirm that digital collecting tends in turn to transcend the systematic dimension towards a fluid time, especially in the case of collections created in streaming applications.

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of these technologies in the time to come is anything but guaranteed so that the old problem of ephemerality arises again in similar yet unprecedented ways.

Despite the availability of more recent devices and services to preserve digital data, we can only avoid ephemerality partially. As Sterne (2009: 58) underlines, "[sound] recording is an extension of ephemerality, not its undoing." These concerns are not alien to the practice of digital collecting, which involves the issue of how to efficiently preserve the items saved in personal storage devices or online. Not only can data become inaccessible, unreadable, or even lost, but they are also perceived mainly as placeless and beyond users' exclusive control (Odom et al. 2012), all aspects that could be understood as different expressions of ephemerality. Ephemerality acquires here a meaning that is close to the concept of *imperfection* as employed by Greimas (2004), indicating the occurrence of something that is cognitively elusive, the residue of hope for a "complete fusion of the subject with the object" (56; my translation). In a sense, the online preservation of collections results in the growing dispersion of users' possessions, which is also reflected in the perception of not properly owning them. More specifically, "participants simultaneously had deep convictions that their online content belongs to them while feeling ambivalent over whether access to them would continue to persist" (7). These feelings, interpreted by the authors in terms of a *loss of control*, and the specific ephemerality that derives from it, distinguish in a significant way the practice of digital collecting from material collections. On the contrary, the latter depend on the principle of ownership/acquisition, require some physical space chosen and curated by the collector, and, if not stolen or badly damaged, always ensure access to the items.

The question remains whether the subjective identity of collectors may be equally reflected in their digital possessions, especially when they are stored online. As seen above, the idea that subjects can be identified with their collection(s) has been central for previous analyses focusing on the meaning of collecting. And yet, it appears seriously jeopardized by the series of issues emerging with managing and preserving digital items. Whereas further research is necessary to understand the different ways the subjective identity is shaped in digital collecting, the following paragraphs will turn toward the social aspects of this practice. Next to the notions of accumulation and abundance, we introduce *meaninglessness*, opening up a reflection on our contemporary culture of *hyper-archivability* in which the boundaries between collecting and archiving become increasingly blurred.

3. The archival collection

In considering the preservation issue within so-called 'collector cultures,' Sterne (2009: 62) observes that "there's too much to collect and not enough of a sense of, or agreement about, what should be collected." Although the scholar refers mainly to the role

played by institutions in the selection and preservation of cultures, his reflections are equally valid in the case of personal or amateur collections. The digital medium's potential for unlimited accumulation and abundance of material can quickly become an obstacle when selecting what to preserve for the future and classifying and curating these resources. While Sterne does not directly mention the question of meaninglessness potentially arising from this massive proliferation, his arguments imply it: the risk seems to be that of accumulating large amounts of data in which the distinction between meaningful and meaningless elements fades away, threatening our ability to interpret the culture(s) we live in.

We should not forget that collections not only look to the past but have increasingly been preserving contemporary culture(s) or that, thanks to the Internet, collections of items from the past contribute to the present-day promotion of earlier lifestyles and cult phenomena. The accumulation of material, data, and cultural artifacts from both the past and present with no clear temporal boundaries is therefore responsible for a different perception of time, which is experienced as becoming increasingly fluid compared to the past, as already anticipated in the previous paragraphs. Unlike material objects, media objects share the same characteristics as *temporal objects* (see Pogačar 2017: 33) as defined by the philosopher Bernard Stiegler. Such objects are constituted by the flow and passing of time instead of stability. According to Pogačar, media objects are distinguished by transitoriness, impermanence, and fluidity, which affect the perception of both the past and the future.

The feeling of uncertainty arising from the different temporalities of the digital can then be responsible for the difficulty in interpreting the world we inhabit, and it may underlie contemporary practices like collecting or archiving. Following Pogačar (ibid.), "the urge to make sense of things through objects (as the connective tissue of memory) explains both the obsession with collecting material and co-creating (digital) media objects." For the author, then, these two practices can be considered in relation to each other, an idea that seems to emerge also in Odom et al. (2012), who, as seen above, do not always distinguish digital collecting from the creation and preservation of (digital) personal archives. If they underline the perceived loss of control and ownership as the main aspects defining digital collections stored online, Pogačar is concerned with how the practices of collecting and creating (or archiving) media objects may involve a potential *loss of meaning*. Collecting and archiving can then be rethought in a contemporary culture marked by the impermanence and fluidity of digital temporalities and the subsequent inability to fully make sense of our present condition.[5]

[5] To highlight the way in which (digital) media affect the human perception of time, Ernst (2013, 2017) talks about *tempor(e)alities*, which differ "significantly from the traditional cultural time and social memory that relies on discursive and institutional tradition in-between human generations" (Ernst 2017: 144).

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **09:**01:2023
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The ease with which digital items (or material objects through the Internet) can be accumulated, if not simply amassed, overlapping and eventually 'erasing' temporalities and spaces, engenders a potential feeling of meaninglessness that affects the practice of collecting. The loss of meaning, already implicit in the decrease of desire caused by abundance (the easy availability of items), manifests as an *excess of accumulation*, i.e., the 'logical' consequence of a system in which selectiveness is increasingly superseded by the same (over)abundance. It is precisely this principle, along with the aforementioned fluidity of media objects and their ambiguous status, suspended between possession and accessibility, that undermines the consistency of digital collections and favors their assimilation to less defined assemblages like amateur archives.

The same issues of abundance and accumulation are indeed at the basis of the creation and maintenance of individual archives. As noted by Gillis (quoted in Haskins 2007: 407), there is a growing uncertainty about what to preserve from our personal and collective past, and, with this doubt, there is a tendency to save practically everything. Echoing Pogačar's reflections on the ambiguous temporalities generated by digital culture, Gillis observes how collecting (which he equates to preserving and archiving) tends to increase in inverse proportion to the human perception of temporal distance; both practices of collecting and archiving, then, originate also from a past that is becoming 'absorbed' into the present, to the point of threatening the individual ability to remember. The empowerment of individual archiving allowed by digital technologies (Cox 2009) comes from anxiousness to save any fragments of our existence, reviving the old dream of preserving our memories, which was already at the basis of Vannevar Bush's *Memex*, conceived by the scientist since the 1930s. Turning towards the individual, archiving and private collecting increasingly blur, opening the space for that ambiguous figure Cox defines as the "citizen archivist."

And yet, the boundaries between individual and collective archiving are not always clearly defined. When introducing the concept of *micro-archives*, Pogačar (2016) draws attention to how cultures of the past are (re)mediated and resurrected by these amateur practices so that the preservation of the past passes (also) through singular acts of remembrance. For the author, micro-archives involve collecting and archiving fragments of audio-visual material circulated online on social media like YouTube or Facebook. Private memories then become publicly available and contribute to the 're-presencing' of a collective past or former lifestyles in the present. As such, these practices are part of a contemporary culture that Brown and Hoskins (2010) define as *hyper-archiva*l, meaning the potentially unlimited storage capacity allowed by digital technologies.

Nevertheless, the retrieval of the past, especially to preserve cultural expressions threatened with disappearance, was already one reason for archiving and collecting well before the advent of the digital medium. The first record collectors, for example, were

often driven by the aim of preserving musical cultures that were likely to be lost (Shuker 2010), and their collections came to constitute future music archives, proving once again how these two practices tend to overlap. The encounter between the personal and social history of the item collected is summarized in the concept of 'curatorial consumption' (McCracken in Geraghty 2014: 110), in which the preservation of the object supersedes its immediate use, thus reversing the consumerist injunction. In this sense, the past is revived as a form of nostalgia, differently from how this feeling is implied in Pogačar's micro-archives. Whereas these latter are involved in a process in which the 'retrieval' of the past threatens the ability to imagine alternative futures, curatorial consumption and its associated nostalgia, on the contrary, encourage "a sense of control over one's past and the media texts still consumed and valued" (Geraghty 2014: 114).

Referring to collecting childhood toys, Geraghty notes how the nostalgia they evoke may lead to an active engagement in the present, overcoming the feelings of loss or lack with which it is generally associated. Thanks to the Internet and its limitless possibilities of re-presencing (to use Pogačar's notion) former cultures, collecting may find a new dimension, integrating with other forms of expression like blogs, fandom communities, or, as repeatedly stated, archives. Thus, it becomes clear how, through these modes of engagement, collecting tends to move away from that exclusive subject-centered practice described by previous research, increasingly favoring social interaction and sharing over the pleasure of personal possession. The transformation of collecting into a less individualistic practice thanks to the digital may represent the most effective response to the perceived loss of meaning generated by the accumulation, abundance, and infinite reproducibility of digital content. If it is true that the traditional understanding of ownership and control over the items is jeopardized in the case of digital collections, especially when stored online, new networks of signification can arise through their being shared, both in the direction of spreading the practice of collecting and in that of preserving former cultural expressions.

These emerging aspects mark the difference between (certain forms of) digital collections and material ones. Examining the still overlooked practices of collecting digital artifacts of participation in the videogame world, Winget (2011: 65) emphasizes the social nature of these forms of collection:

> Because their materials […] are freely available or easily obtained, instead of focusing on acquisition, new media collectors focus their energies on organization and sharing. Because there are few if any physical limitations to storage and display, these collectors are much more concerned with providing access to as many people as possible. […] Because the collectors essentially collect in order to share, the collections are often highly organized, if not contextualized for the general public.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **09:**01:2023
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These observations are equally valid for many digital collections primarily concerned with preserving their content and often assuming the form of archives, mainly because of the curatorial practices they require. An example of how collecting, sharing, and archiving may overlap is given by the *Kayo Kyoku Plus* blog, created and maintained by J-Canuck.[6] He describes himself as a fan of Japanese pop music (mainly produced in the 1970s and 1980s) and, above all, as a collector of related material. J-Canuck created the blog to share his knowledge and passion for this music and link up with other interested people who can contribute (write posts) or comment on the texts uploaded. Moreover, the blog is an excellent example of how owned material, in the form of pictures displayed and publicly accessible content, may coexist since the music videos of the songs introduced and described by J-Canuck and the other contributors are actually from other sources, particularly YouTube.

All this translates into the collection's unstable and ultimately ephemeral character: the uploaded videos often become unavailable over time, leaving empty black boxes instead of the expected displayed content. Even if this latter can usually be played by linking to the website where the videos were initially uploaded (YouTube), the 'feeling of loss' perceived by the user persists. To put it differently, we experience that the collection somehow *fails*, a sensation already described above concerning the disappearance/unavailability that characterizes digital material. In addition, the presence of hypertext links to other websites (YouTube or J-Wiki) contributes to the opening out and fluidity of the collection, which is ultimately perceived as *diffused* (in the sense of 'scattered'), thus undermining the internal integrity/unity that appeared as a distinctive feature of material collections.

These specific expressions of ephemerality and fragmentation that distinguish some digital collections from physical ones, due also to the fact that most of the content is not owned by the collector, can, however, be compensated by the increased visibility, shareability, and curatorial aspects allowed by the digital medium. Whereas Watkins, Sellen, and Lindley (2015) comment on the difficulties people often face in organizing their digital collections in ways that may reflect their individuality, *Kayo Kyoku Plus* shows how the archiving, classification, and display of content may become a primary aspect of collecting. Through the exhibition of image and video material, J-Canuck and the other contributors can still "serve the same self-reflective and self-presentational purpose" (3430) that the authors recognize as central to material collections. Not only do the bloggers share with others their knowledge and passion for Japanese popular music, eventually enhancing their experience of collecting artifacts, but they also often connect elements of

[6] *Kayo Kyoku* (properly *Kayōkyoku*) is the broad and highly heterogeneous Japanese pop music born from the assimilation of Western musical styles in the 1920s. Nowadays, the term has been largely replaced by the more common J-pop, which entered the Japanese music scene in the 1990s. Kayo Kyoku Plus can be accessed at the following link: http://kayokyokuplus.blogspot.com/.

their memories to these (mostly not owned) materials, proving that self-reflection, preservation of cultural expressions and social interactions may perfectly coexist in digital collections. Moreover, the lack of social visibility claimed by Watkins, Sellen, and Lindley (2015) as a problematic aspect of digital collecting, along with the lack of curation, can be overcome when emphasis is put on the sharing of the content instead of its possession, and when the promotion of cultural identities is favored over self-reflexivity.

The example of *Kayo Kyoku Plus* proves that new forms of significance and personal investment can also arise from collecting items not owned by the collector(s), especially when they require essential curatorial practices that bring them closer to archives. The organization of collections has traditionally been regarded as a fundamental aspect in transforming the accumulation of items into "meaningful possessions" (Denegri-Knott, Watkins, and Wood 2012). Moreover, their display in the digital space is no less important for attributing to them a real significance, as evidenced by research on improving the digital visibility of items (Harrison et al. 2017). The time and physical investment in curatorial practices characterizing archival collections like *Kayo Kyoku Plus* goes in the same direction, encouraging a different understanding of collecting, in which personal interests and memories find a collective dimension. If, on the individual level, the digital (over)abundance and replicability of the items are often responsible for that feeling of meaninglessness described above, on a social level, these aspects can find alternative forms of significance, leading to a re-evaluation of the contemporary culture of accessibility and sharing.

Finally, on the semiotic level, the case of *Kayo Kyoku Plus* clearly shows how *amateur* enunciators, and no longer just institutional ones, are able not only to (re)create and foster the circulation of popular culture(s) within a hypermediatized society but also to originate collectives (Carlón 2020). The notion of *collective*, which comes from the works of Eliseo Verón, is different from that of communities or fans; it tends to be more 'elitist' compared to them and is defined as an ensemble of social actors that emerges within media communication, to be understood in a broad sense as a set of various practices that exceeds the discursive level. The curatorial and participatory approach encouraged by online spaces such as *Kayo Kyoku Plus* favors the formation of collectives more than simple communities, actively involved in the (re)production of communication/culture in ways and proportions that were impossible in the previous media and mediatized societies (see also Carlón 2019).

4. The 'immoral' collector

Along with dismissing the criteria of ownership and scarcity, the examples of collecting in the context of music streaming and archival collections like *Kayo Kyoku Plus* abolish another principle that has long been regarded as highly significant: the cult of authenticity.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **09:**01:2023
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 10.18680/hss.2023.0010 | **punctum.gr**

From a semiotic perspective, we view something as authentic as long as it 'negates' the fact of being (culturally) (re)produced, an aspect that is defined as the *paradox of authenticity* (Sedda 2015). This relates mainly to the materiality of collections, not only because of the value placed on the original (or first release) but also in those cases in which the object possesses an "auratic indexicality" (Mardon and Belk 2018: 555), meaning a close connection to a particular place, time or person.[7] Authenticity, however, is seriously threatened by digital items, primarily because of their unlimited replicability, which is at the origin of the already discussed (over)abundance of digital material and its collecting. The desire tends to shift from the previously valued material form of the object collected to the information it contains (Reas 2019), leading to that culture of sharing mentioned above and existing on the border between legality and illegality.

In reality, however, the dismissal of authenticity and the related emergence of a culture of reproducibility began well before the advent of the digital medium. The collection of copies, made possible by technological innovations like photography and electrotyping, meant the 'complex fusing of the object as image' (Geismar 2018: 50) or, vice versa, the increasing understanding of the image as an object. In this changed context, it is the same paradigm of collecting that changes, replacing the value of authenticity with those of replicability and accessibility that would later become central to the digital. Geismar's observations highlight the role played by socioeconomic and technological transformations in (re)defining collecting over time, an aspect often overshadowed by persistent preconceived ideas. If the contemporary culture of hyper-archivability illustrated above contributes to the change in collecting, the unlimited reproducibility of digital material, the prevalence of accessibility over ownership, and, ultimately, the possibility to illegally acquire items on the Internet plays no less significant role.

Although dependent on the economic system and mass production, collecting has, over time, developed some forms of 'internal subversion.' As Roy (2016: 105) remarks, past or obsolete objects may "enter new life-cycles, through marginal and sometimes informal networks of distribution (a form of shadow capitalism, realized in second-hand markets or the economy of giving or swapping)." Despite the market's ability to develop new strategies for capitalizing on the nostalgia revival that underlies these forms of micro or alternative economy, there is always the possibility to renew them, including illegal practices such as downloading copyrighted material without permission. This alternative, in particular, affects collecting significantly (at least potentially) and is yet to be extensively addressed by research. As an undesired outcome of digital reproducibility/replicability, illegal online purchase represents a further step in collecting material not owned by their collectors, jeopardizing their sense of identification with such 'possessions.'

[7] Mardon and Belk include in the concept of 'authenticity' also those objects whose value is rooted in what they define as 'iconic cues,' i.e., the various degrees of resemblance of the object to the original/indexical exemplar (as in the case of replicas).

The association between collecting and illegality, however, is nothing new. As already noted by de Kosnik (2012), collectors have occasionally been depicted as thieves, as in stories recounting how their passion for collecting originated in the act of stealing (or vice versa), but collectors have even at times been connected to immorality. Before the Internet, videotape collecting often involved making illegal copies of friends' tapes (526), with consequent copyright infringement. But even previously, the practice of collecting was not alien to immoral actions: referring to European aristocratic collections of the past, Francis (2023: 71-72) recalls how they mainly originated in imperial hoarding, meaning the expropriation of objects from territories under colonial rule. Many later came to constitute the collections we find nowadays in Western museums, "legitimizing" de facto their misappropriation in the past. This illegal aspect of collecting seems to resurface symbolically in what Stewart (1993: 135) calls 'the romance of contraband,' i.e., the scandal originating from the removal of the souvenir/collectible "from its 'natural' location.' In this long history of illegality and transgression, in the end, Internet piracy merely casts yet another shadow over ambiguity in the act of collecting.

5. Conclusion. The unpredictable future of collecting

The present article opened with two personal experiences of loss and dispossession about collecting. These feelings have become significant in an age when this long-established practice is redefining itself beyond materiality and the traditional understanding of ownership. Nevertheless, as illustrated in the previous paragraphs, from the threat of subject-collectors becoming progressively 'effaced' from what they accumulate, alternative forms of collecting are affirmed, shifting towards the value of sharing and the sense of being part of a community that both promotes and preserves the cultures on which it is founded. More than of communities, it is appropriate to speak of collectives (Carlón 2020), as seen above, which are created by a growing number of amateurs who invest time and resources in curating digital collections that appear more and more like archives.

From a semiotic perspective, the study of these curatorial practices becomes indispensable for understanding how the cultural production of the past and present is put (back) into circulation, making it even more complex and unpredictable the future of collecting within the digital realm. The overlapping of archives and collections described in this paper can be put concerning those processes of *networked co-curation* that characterize Net Art (Dekker 2021) and (re)introduce some uncertainty in the same curatorial practice. Moreover, the high fragmentation and heterogeneity of the practices of digital collecting, in which items can be either acquired or simply accessed, if not eventually illegally downloaded, undermine the feelings of self-identification with one's collection in a significant way, challenging the traditional theory centered on personal experiences of possession.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **09:**01:2023
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On the other hand, as seen throughout this article, uncertainty and unpredictability do not necessarily lead to the perception of digital collecting as insignificant. As Niemeyer and Keightley (2020: 1643) highlight regarding online communities that arise from the commodification of nostalgia on the web, new forms of textual instability, as well as networked sense-making practices and potential multiplicity of interpretations may be generated even where the longing for the past is induced 'from above.' The curatorial processes described in this paper go precisely in this direction, shifting the focus from the subject-collector to a new kind of participatory practice that reshapes the very meaning of collection in unpredictable ways.

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