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The study presented in this paper explores the information seeking and behavior of committed collectors of vinyl records. Through a series of thorough, semi-structured interviews with hobbyist collectors, this study provides a deeper understanding of how they search for, assess, share, and utilize different types of information to support their collecting activities. Patterns and themes in the interview data are evinced through qualitative coding and analysis. In doing so, this study introduces new contexts and perspectives to the field of leisure and information studies, and contributes additional insight into how non-professional collectors and other serious hobbyists address their information needs without the support of a formal institution or organization.

Headings:

Information-seeking behavior

Searching behavior

Phonograph records

Information literacy

Information skills

Media literacy

Information Seeking and Behavior Among Collectors of Vinyl Records

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Introduction

Whether for trading cards, stamps, or rare rubber ducks, collecting represents a timeless and cherished pastime among people all over the world. Between individual collectors, the meaning of their amassed objects and the intensity and methods with which they pursue them can differ in substantial ways. Previous literature acknowledges such variation and sorts them into collector typologies defined by personal motivation and practice: certain collectors, for instance, seek out objects as a possible financial investment, leaning on the belief that these objects will gain monetary value over time, whereas collectors of another type might partake in their hobby for more personal, non-monetary reasons—because they find their particular object aesthetically appealing, or because for them it holds an important association with memory, experience, or identity (Case 2009; Hillis, Petit, and Epley 2006).

Perhaps one might expect collectors of entirely different objects to exhibit some variation in their motivations and habits, but as Lee and Trace (2008) note, substantial and compelling nuance can also exist between those who seek objects of the same type. In their study on collectors of rare rubber ducks, they found that the individuals in their sample demonstrated both similarities and disparities in their reasons for collecting, and, more importantly, in their information sources and behaviors (Lee and Trace, 2008). This latter concern figures prominently in the objectives of the present study, which in many

respects seeks to translate the work of Lee and Trace into an entirely different realm of collecting: that of vinyl records, especially those considered more uncommon and therefore difficult to find. Although a substantial amount of previous research has centered on record collecting—and collecting at large—and its social, cultural, political, and psychological underpinnings, none to the author’s knowledge has yet to incorporate the critical element of information seeking and behavior (Maalsen and McLean, 2018; Shuker, 2010). The present study seeks to fill this gap by shedding additional light on the robust information behaviors of record collectors and, in doing so, contribute further insight into how hobbyist collectors find, engage with, and share information without the resources afforded by a formal institution or organization.

Literature Review

Exploring the Ordinary and the Pleasurable

The lion's share of past library and information science (LIS) research has centered on "occupational information phenomena," or on information-seeking needs and behaviors as they relate to the workplace and the questions and problems that arise therein (Kari and Hartel 2007; Lee and Trace 2009). A vast amount of LIS research has also focused on academic and "scholastic" contexts, to such an extent that Hartel (2003) identifies an implicit academic epicenter to LIS scholarship. Possible reasons for such focus emerge readily enough: on the one hand, studies situated in academic and professional contexts typically navigate a more structured environment compared to those steeped in everyday life, whose "nebulous and varied happenings" can indeed make for slippery subjects (Hartel 2003, p. 228). On the other hand, such structure often supports information-intensive activities—especially in the academic realm, where information production, organization, and exchange remain overarching goals—which renders it a naturally appealing context for LIS research.

Over time, however, a growing community of LIS researchers has explored in greater depth human information-seeking behavior and its applications outside of professional and academic contexts. Much of the research generated by this community falls into the category of *everyday life information seeking*, or ELIS (Savolainen 1995).

And although this relatively young subfield deserves credit for bringing attention to the ultimately limited focus of traditional LIS research, a significant portion of ELIS studies stems from a problem approach in which subjects grapple with a significant information barrier or real-life complication, such as illness (Kari and Hartel 2007; Hartel 2003). Hartel (2003) illustrates this topical affinity in her own survey of ELIS research, whose subjects encompass such matters as major life transitions, breast cancer, lupus, and information barriers present in retirement communities and prisons. To reiterate, these topics without a doubt constitute important and pressing ones, insofar as they provide greater understanding of how information might be used to navigate difficult or even traumatic situations (Hartel 2003). That said, for many people, such situations thankfully do not represent the brunt of everyday experience, and thus, for all the merit of the aforementioned ELIS research, it leaves unattended questions of information behavior as they relate to the more ordinary and pleasurable elements of everyday life.

Serious Leisure and Collecting

Stebbins (2001, 2005), Lee and Trace (2009), and Hartel (2003) address this overlooked area of ELIS by situating their research in explorations of leisure and—more pertinently, for the present study’s purposes—*serious* leisure. Whereas “casual” leisure comprises any “uncoerced activity undertaken during free time where such activity is something people want to do,” Stebbins (who originally coined the term) distinguishes *serious* leisure as a more involved, systematic, and effortful activity “that participants find so substantial and interesting that ... they launch themselves on a leisure career

centered on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge, and experience” (Hartel 2003, p. 229; Stebbins 2005, 2001, p. 3). Stebbins’ likening this form of leisure to a type of career points to its prolonged and persistent character and renders those who participate in such careers as people committed to acquiring *skills, knowledge, and experience* over time (Stebbins 2001). In this sense, even if we were not to venture beyond its basic definition, the subject of serious leisure would from the start appear as one of enormous potential relevance and importance to LIS, as the seeking out and cultivation of knowledge—central concerns in LIS studies at large—represent critical elements in successful serious leisure activities (Hartel 2003). Such relevance only deepens as we consider the everyday information behaviors and exchange practices among serious leisure participants. However, in order to make this point most apparent, I will first provide an overview of Stebbins’ archetypes for serious leisure participants, and then illustrate how one of these—collectors—proves especially compelling as a subject of LIS research.

Participants of serious leisure fall into three main typologies: amateurs, volunteers, and hobbyists (Hartel 2003). Of these, only hobbyists concern the present study, and thus they alone will receive further consideration here. Hobbyists can belong to one or more of the following five typologies: (1) makers and tinkerers; (2) participants in non-competitive but rule-based activities; (3) participants in competitive and rule-based, but not professional sports and games; (4) liberal and performing arts enthusiasts; and, finally, (5) collectors (Lee and Trace 2009; Stebbins 1992). According to Stebbins, the last of these—collectors—desire and specialize in a particular item, and as they attempt to expand their collection and learn more about its potential scope, they develop a

robust “technical knowledge of the commercial, social, and physical circumstances in which the desired items are acquired”; meanwhile, they “also develop a sophisticated appreciation of these items, along with a broad understanding of their historical and contemporary production and use” (1992, p. 11). Herein lies so much of collectors’ captivating quality as a potential subject for LIS research: not only do they endeavor on their own volition to acquire, synthesize, and use highly specialized and *technical* knowledge over enough time to constitute a *career*, but they do so, as Hartel rightly points out, at the cost of *significant* personal effort, and *without* the aid of any *centralized* infrastructure or foundation of institutional support (Stebbins 1992; Hartel 2003). Instead, collectors must rely on *social worlds* found or constructed across the span of their career. Unruh, the concept’s originator, defines a social world as a “constellation of actors, organizations, events, and practices which have coalesced into a perceived sphere of interest and involvement for participants” (1979, p. 115). Hartel adds that these worlds “are voluntary” and have “no formal boundaries,” and that people can “inhabit more than one in their lives” (Hartel 2003, p. 231). For collectors, these social worlds might comprise vendors of their desired object, appraisers, friends, family (as admirers, for instance, or even financial supporters of the collection), manufacturers, and of course their fellow collectors. Within such a world, librarians at best occupy the intermediary role of *stranger*, whereas collectors themselves represent *insiders*: those who must learn to navigate this world and find within it the information required to expand their serious hobbies (Hartel 2003; Unruh 1979, 1980).

Thus, as students and practitioners of library and information science, we find ourselves on the outskirts of uncounted worlds in which individuals use self-found or

proprietary means to seek, discover, exchange, and operate upon highly specialized information—information that, in all likelihood, would not be covered in any library professional’s traditional education and training. Previous research has attempted to breach these worlds in order to learn more about information’s role within them. For instance, in their study of a community of rubber duck collectors, Lee and Trace (2009) demonstrate the strong, persistent flow of information throughout the community (or social world), and its powerful facilitative effect on collecting activities. Meanwhile, Case’s (2009) study of coin collectors not only illustrates several of their methods in identifying, organizing, and operating on relevant information, but also explores some of the potential motivations that galvanize collecting activities. Although both studies offer compelling insight into the information-seeking behaviors of their participants, they represent only two of innumerable collecting contexts throughout the world; as such, we cannot fully know whether striking commonalities or deviations in information behavior exist between collecting communities without studying additional ones (Lee and Trace 2009). To this end, in the spirit of Lee and Trace, this study seeks to contribute additional knowledge on serious collector communities and their information behaviors by exploring an entirely different realm of collecting: vinyl records.

Why vinyl record collectors?

Between Lee and Trace’s amassers of rubber ducks and Case’s coin collectors, in their respective studies we encounter items on opposite ends of the popularity spectrum. Indeed, according to Lee and Trace, rubber duck collectors still remain “relatively rare”

despite the item's "international scope and steady growth" (2009, p. 623).

Meanwhile, coins and currency represent some of the most collected and consistently valuable items in the world (Haqqi 2021; Lewiston 2019). But what about vinyl records? Even as streaming platforms continue to dominate the music industry as consumers' go-to means of listening, vinyl records have seen a steady resurgence in popularity and sales in recent years (Guerra 2014; Lewiston 2019; Guerra 2014; Schwab 2021). By the midpoint of 2021, vinyl record sales reached an approximate 19.2 million units, compared to a single million in 2007 (Garcia 2021; Friedlander 2021). Whether or not these figures include used record sales (it appears not) remains difficult to determine, but, even if they do, they represent a meteoric rise in popular interest.

One could argue that, on its own, this burgeoning popularity constitutes a powerful enough reason for centering the present study on vinyl records. Yet ample research on record collecting predates the current vinyl boom: Maalsen and McLean (2018) interrogated the masculine stereotypes of the music industry and its marginalizing effects on women record collectors; Hendricks (2016) investigated the shifting social positions of independent record stores and collectors as a consequence of streaming's popularity; Sonnichsen (2017) reimagined the vinyl record as an artifact of musical tourism and a cultural underground; and, finally, in his 2010 book, Shuker synthesized a thorough historical and ethnographic portrait of numerous individual record collectors and the world they represent. What emerges from these works—which, it should be said, represent only a fraction of the available research on vinyl records—is a prevailing cultural, economic, and ethnographic curiosity in the medium that refuses to remit, as if some of the intrepid, persistent, passionate, and even *obsessive* spirit of the record-

collecting world pulls researchers in from the outside (Shuker 2010). Without a doubt such spirit has caught my own attention, but this alone does not account for the impetus of the present study. Rather, for all the research conducted on vinyl records and the many economic, social, and cultural concerns they encompass, none of this research, to the author's knowledge, has yet to incorporate the critical element of information-seeking behavior. As Stebbins, Hartel, Case, Lee and Trace, and others exemplify, the information-rich social worlds of collectors represent enormously fruitful subjects of investigation; it is for this reason that I seek to study one that, up to this point, has remained overlooked in LIS research.

Research Questions

This study aims to observe and understand the information behaviors and practices of serious vinyl record collectors. To this end, I will endeavor to answer the following questions:

1. What kinds of information do serious record collectors rely on to support their hobby? How do they use this information?
2. Without an institutional imperative and support network, what information sources and seeking methods do record collectors employ?
3. How do record collectors determine whether sources and seeking methods are trustworthy and reliable?
4. How do personal motivation and investment relate to the information strategies and behaviors of record collectors, if they do at all?

For purposes of this study, I will define serious record collectors as *any collector demonstrating long-term, effortful commitment to, specialized knowledge of, and sophisticated appreciation for the object of their collecting.*

Methodology

This study was designed and conducted as a qualitative investigation composed primarily of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Developing a greater understanding of the information behaviors and practices of serious record collectors constitutes the central purpose of this study. Given the lack of institutional imperative and support among these collectors, the likelihood of extracting this information from official documentation or clerical data seems incredibly unlikely. As such, conducting semi-structured interviews appeared the more sensible option for collecting informative and reliable data.

Meanwhile, the firsthand, more personable nature of interviews supports my interests in collector motivation and investment (as contained in Research Question 4). As illustrated by Hartel (2003), Lee and Trace (2009), Shulker (2010), and others, the galvanizing forces behind collecting activities can stem from material, social, cultural, or emotional grounds. The flexible, conversational quality of semi-structured interviews granted participants greater opportunity to expand upon the nuances of not only this particular research question, but the others as well.

Positionality / Researcher Role

Although I possess a (very) modest record collection of my own, I would nonetheless classify my position relative to the study's participants as that of an outsider.

At present I do not collect anything, let alone records, to the serious degree defined by Stebbins (2001) and exhibited by the study's participants. Participants in the study represent experts with numerous years of experience and collections that comprise multiple records that are no longer in production or else are only currently available in reissued form. As such, I have assumed the role of a learner with respect to serious collecting in general and record collecting in particular. In this role, I encouraged participants to share their expert knowledge and experience with me, which I have recorded and synthesized to the best of my ability here.

Context

The population of interest for this study comprises record collectors who meet the criteria defined earlier. The sampling unit includes currently active collectors (as in those still engaged in collecting activities) of age 18 years or older, along with one participant who recently retired from collecting after more than 20 years of maintaining the hobby. To recruit participants, I first relied on convenience sampling, as I am fortunate enough to know a number of dedicated collectors personally. These collectors all reside in the United States, but their personal contexts, backgrounds, and musical interests differ enough that their participation yielded data with informative contrasts. A standard recruitment email and consent form was sent to each of the three members of the convenience sample to secure their consent and participation (Appendix A). This initial sample allowed for snowball recruitment via the participants' contacts and 'colleagues' in

the collecting world, yielding an additional three participants who also signed and returned consent forms.

Ultimately, these sampling methods yielded a total of six participants. Although I understand this limited size prohibits the study from generalizability, achieving this particular quality of research lies outside of the study's ultimate goal. My aim is to establish an in-depth understanding of the participants' information behaviors as they relate to collecting, rather than to identify large-scale patterns or conclusions. Conducting semi-structured interviews with a small sample not only proved the more realistic option given the study's limited time and resources, but it also yielded rich and informative data that should satisfy the study's chief aims.

Data Collection Methods

The central means of data collection for this study was semi-structured interviews, which was chosen in hopes of gathering the rich and highly detailed data necessary for understanding the nuanced information behaviors and practices of a serious collecting community. Much of this extra detail and richness owes to the interview form's flexibility; compared to static, pre-written surveys or questionnaires, semi-structured interviews afford opportunities to probe participants on interesting developments in the discussion, while allowing for the spontaneous addition of new questions and thereby additional insights. The interview guide comprised nine questions that were designed to encourage participants to reflect not only on their collecting experiences in a broad sense,

but also more specifically on the ways in which they found and used information while engaged in collecting activities. The final interview questions consisted of the following:

1. What drew you to record collecting originally?
2. What about the experience keeps you interested? What motivates you to continue collecting?
3. What information sources do you use to help you find records for possible purchase?
4. How do you determine whether these information sources are credible and/or reliable?
5. What attributes are important to you in determining whether to add a record to your collection? In other words, how do you determine a record's value?
6. How do you determine whether a seller or vendor is trustworthy/reliable?
7. How do you keep your collection organized?
8. How do you care for the items in your collection?
9. What, in your eyes, qualifies an *expert* collector? How do you distinguish expert collectors from those on a more 'casual' level?

Because of geographic and scheduling constraints, four of the interviews took place over Zoom, while two were conducted in-person at a local coffee shop. The interviews took between 15 and 40 minutes. Occasionally, additional questions beyond those listed above were asked to encourage elaboration or clarification on certain points. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed using Otter.

Data Analysis Methods

After processing transcriptions for each interview, I assessed them for errors and corrected any that emerged. All transcripts were anonymized with randomly assigned participant numbers (P1, P2, P3, and so on), which are used as identifiers in the findings of this paper. I created an initial in vivo coding scheme by hand, which I refined on subsequent coding iterations. By conducting multiple sessions of hand coding, I attained a more familiar understanding of the interview transcripts and was therefore able to generate apt and useful categories for the data. Codes were compared for each interview question, and any potentially meaningful contrasts and similarities were recorded and analyzed.

Research Quality and Ethical Considerations

As an instance of qualitative research that relied heavily on interview data and my own interpretive faculties, this study demanded that I establish its trustworthiness through careful attention to its credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Where credibility is concerned, I maintained full transparency as it pertains to my research subjects and procedures. Quotes from the initial interview transcriptions are included to illustrate proper representation of the study's participants. Preestablished methodology and theory served as guides in the gathering, analysis, and synthesis of all data points. Data points that seemed to contradict apparent patterns or conclusions were subject to negative analysis. As for dependability, I established this quality through an

honest, thoroughly documented accounting of any difficulties and/or errors encountered throughout the study and their possible ramifications regarding the final results and conclusions. I have sought to attain transferability in this study through detailing and explaining its context, involved subjects, and finalized methods. Meanwhile I have also maintained a scrupulous documentation trail that might allow for deeper evaluation and, should it prove necessary, reanalysis performed by myself and external readers. This documentation might also enable subsequent researchers to translate relevant design elements to other populations and subjects, should they wish. Finally, regarding my own positionality, I will disclose with full transparency my own beliefs, biases, values, and assumptions, along with how these elements might affect the results of the study.

Regarding the ethical considerations that might apply to this study, its interview-based design carried extremely limited potential for participant harm overall. Some of the immediate possible threats to participants included the clear establishment of informed consent and confidentiality. These threats I addressed by first explaining the purpose of the interview and the types of questions it involved, and by ensuring participants that they would only be represented in the study by first name *if they wished*; otherwise, an alternative identifier was agreed upon and has been used in the written findings. All interview data—including consent documentation, raw recordings, and transcriptions—have been stored on a password-protected computer with updated AntiVirus and AntiSpyware software. Interviews were transcribed and scrupulously assessed for accuracy. To maximize participant comfort, I maintained full cordialness and encouraged them to speak openly and indulge tangents, so long as the interview did not veer too far

off topic. I emphasized that mine is an exploratory study born out of genuine interest in the participants' domain (record collecting), and that as such I desired no particular or correct type of answer from them. At the end of each interview, I explained the overall purpose of the study and its potential impact, along with my own credentials as a graduate student at SILS. Then, of course, I restated my gratitude for their participation.

Findings

Making a Collector

I chose my first two interview questions (What drew you to record collecting originally? What motivates you to continue collecting?) as a means of uncovering some of the foundational sources of interest and persistent motivation for serious record collectors, as I believed these factors could at least partially shape information's role in their collecting endeavors. Among the study's participants, similarities emerged in that their interest in collecting grew as a natural extension of an early love of music. Multiple participants located this passion as beginning in their teenage or college years. P5 cited his "interest in music going back to his childhood," which proved true for P1 as well: "I've been [collecting records] since high school. As a kid I was totally obsessed with my iPod and had music everywhere." Two participants—P2 and P6—cited participation in their college radio stations as an essential catalyst of their collecting career. P2 described her love of music and eventual dedication to collecting as beginning "almost as a matter of convenience, but now obsession. Originally, I was around records working at WXYC as an undergrad. We definitely had access to a wide swath of records." P6 also found such access to be a crucial galvanizing force for his eventual record collecting: "I was very into going into the radio station where they had a huge CD and record collection. Finding stuff there, playing it at random. The raw exposure to music." P4, likely the most casual of the collectors who participated in the study, discovered her passion for music—and, in turn, vinyl records—by working at a record shop while in college.

For all participants, passion for music at large eventually translated into a specific fixation on vinyl records. Interestingly, every participant cited the tactile nature of vinyl records (compared to other, digital formats such as MP3 and streaming services) as one of the primary reasons they felt drawn to the format. In fact, P2 considers the physicality of vinyl records as a distinct advantage over digital formats. She said, “One thing I think about a lot is that with digital files, there’s not as much of a sense of permanence, and it’s really easy for me to forget things I like. But when I own a record of it, it’s easier for me to get a visual reminder from the record itself.” P6 also noted his appreciation for the more memorable and persistent presence of vinyl records compared to digital formats, saying, “I was really into mp3s and blogs and downloading music and stuff, but it was just not easy to connect to the music or create a lasting memory of it if I didn’t have some physical investment in it.” Vinyl records give tactile form to an otherwise intangible medium and thereby permit it to occupy real, physical spaces in the collector’s life. To the study’s participants, this physical presence translates into a more persistent one in memory. Beyond this advantage, however, other participants such as P3 also find that vinyl records’ tactility enables them to achieve more intimate and personal connections with the music itself:

“The physical tactility of a record is really satisfying. It makes you care about the artistic aspect of records—their packaging, their design, which is really easy to gloss over if you’re not holding it in your hands. Getting to consume it fully ... It’s a much more personal experience when you’re listening to a record and holding it and looking at the art and reading along with the lyrics as you consume it. I feel like you come to appreciate specific records much more if you actually have them in your collection physically.”

P1, meanwhile, likens the experience of collecting records to that of collecting other forms of physical art. Uniquely among all study participants, she delineated the history of individual records as an especially compelling aspect of interest:

“Today, I think about [record collecting] a lot more like art collecting. Having that physical copy or representation of a piece of music. The historical aspect is a lot more important to me than it used to be. Primarily what I collect these days is new age records from the 70s and 80s. A lot of them are records that weren’t pressed a ton and are valuable to me in the sense that this thing only existed at one point of time, and maybe the artist only put out one record, and that uniqueness about it makes it really cool and special to actually have a copy. There are some records I have that probably less than a thousand people in the world have a copy of. And that’s kind of cool in the sense that I’ve researched something and found it to be really important to me, I love the music, and I get to have this special unique thing that connects me to it.”

P1’s *researching* records for possible purchase is far from an anomaly. In fact, many other participants in the study also reflected on how personal research has often proved a vital component of their collecting careers. In the next section, we will examine some of the information sources and search methods used by our study participants as they research and hunt for new records.

Websites and Wayfinding

Across the majority of interview responses, websites and online aggregators figured prominently as go-to resources for collector research and activity. In particular, the most cited website was Discogs, a vast, user-generated database and marketplace with more than 600,000 community contributors since 2000 (Discogs.com). P1 counted herself among frequent Discogs users and described the site as follows:

“Discogs is huge. Probably like the best, most comprehensive database of record buying and selling information that I know of. You can see price history, all the

information about different pressings and labels. People will list out features to look for. If you have a case of a record that's been pressed many times but you're looking for a specific year, you can find all that information on Discogs. And it's also really helpful for discovering new records because they recommend things. If you're looking at a particular artist, you can look at their whole discography, or you can look at the whole discography for a certain label. It's just a huge, gigantic database."

On Discogs, record collectors can find not only valuable information on albums and artists of which they already know, but also ample opportunity for discovery. P6 mentioned using Discogs "extensively," and P3 recognized how its database is "not complete," but still provided "access to a wide variety of things." P5, the collector with the longest career out of all study participants, stated that he has "contributed" to the Discogs database "a lot" with information on rare, previously unincluded records from his own collection.

For all the popularity of Discogs, it is certainly not the only source of information employed by serious record collectors. P6 mentioned the websites eBay and Popsike as other useful online resources, especially for assessing the relative value of certain records. Both P5 and P6 cited books and magazines such as *The Penguin Guide to Jazz Recordings* (2008) and *Vinyl Age* (2020) as additional sources of helpful information. But by far the most universal source among participants lay outside the boundaries of websites and books. *All* participants acknowledged social interactions with their record collecting communities as an essential source of information. As P6 stated, "there's a community aspect to [collecting]. I have groups of people with whom I interact frequently in real life and on the internet, where we trade and discuss records we found. That's a big part of where I learn about things." P1 also emphasized the importance of her social community in supporting her hobby: "I talk to people a lot. Figuring out the

stores other people like to go to. Word of mouth. Usually other people who were also into collecting records.”

According to some participants, many of these interactions take place over social media. Although, as P6 pointed out, most “social media platforms are not really designed” to accommodate record collecting communities specifically, they nonetheless serve a vital function in facilitating connections between collectors, vendors, and other members of the community. To return to P6: “It’s more in accessing individuals on these platforms who have this knowledge and share this knowledge with me.” In P3’s experience, social media has occasionally even introduced him to albums and artists that larger aggregators such as Discogs might have missed. He stated, “I follow a lot of people who are very hip to Japanese punk music ... and they always post all these records I’ve never heard of, a lot of which aren’t really even archived online very closely.”

Two study participants—P2 and P4—proved unique in that they deliberately abstained from using online sources (excluding social media) to support their collecting. P4 stated that she “doesn’t really do the digital path. It’s really just anytime I walk into a store ... If something grabs my eye, I’ll pick it up. It’s completely organic in the sense that it’s almost like an accident.” P2, meanwhile, described her approach to collecting as such:

“For me, it’s definitely a practice of wayfinding. I don’t use any online aggregators. I don’t use journalistic sites or recommenders. I use people. I’ll talk to [my friend], and he’ll tell me what’s new. Or it’s physical wayfinding. I’ll go to the record store and look through new arrivals and look through all the new used records. Things that look interesting to me or have a cool cover, or a record label that I already like or am familiar with, I’ll listen to it and from there decide whether to purchase it.”

In P2's mode of collecting, research is largely eschewed in favor of serendipitous discovery. Rather than excavating information about records online—removed from the physical records themselves—P2 and P4 rely on whatever preexisting knowledge they carry with them into the record (or thrift) store, along with any providable by the store's staff. With this knowledge, they can confirm familiar facets of a given record—the artist or label, for instance—or else decide to take a chance on something unfamiliar, whether on the grounds of interesting cover art, samples of the music itself, or other reasons such as recommendations. But even for those participants more inclined toward online research, this real-world, more serendipitous style of searching is at once welcome and often necessary. P6, for example, mentioned his appreciation for “being able to go to record and thrift stores and stumble across things in the wild,” while P3 described “hunting” in the real world as “the fun part”:

“The hunt for that connection with other records you either knew about or didn't. The fun part about actually digging for records at record stores or estate sales or whatever is that you get to make those personal discoveries that you had no clue existed but now suddenly you're so involved with it. You never would have had any connection to that piece of media, but then suddenly you're obsessed with it in a pretty special and unique way.”

Whatever information sources are used—be they online aggregators, real-life friends, or something else—their variety and depth evince the capable and often quite savvy skills among record collectors for seeking and operating upon information to support their hobby.

Assessing Credibility

In terms of how these collectors determine viable and trustworthy sources of information relevant to their hobby, they consider a variety of facets shaped in part by individual taste and collecting philosophy. Discogs, the most widely used information source among study participants, is composed of exclusively user-generated data, which might in theory introduce issues of factualness and credibility. But, according to study participants, such issues are just that: theory. As P6 put it, “[Discogs] is all user-generated, of course, but all the metadata is factual information based on what is *physically available* to take in from the record itself” (emphasis mine). In essence, these collectors place their trust in Discogs because so much of the information it contains derives directly from original sources—from covers, inserts, liner notes, and so on, all transcribed from real, physical materials in the hands of other collectors and vendors. P1, another frequent user of Discogs, finds the site even more trustworthy on account of its immense popularity. She stated,

“I know so many people who use it and have used it professionally. It’s not like I’ve looked at something in particular and know, ‘Oh, that’s credible.’ It’s just so widely used and ubiquitous that it has to be credible, if that makes sense? When I talk to record collectors, they’re usually people I’ve known a long time, so I just trust them.”

As for the collectors who abstain from or limit their use of online aggregators such as Discogs, they rely on more intuitive cues in the real world and on social media that convey knowledgeable and expertise. P2, for instance, determines whether she can trust a record store based on its organization system and aesthetic emphasis:

“I judge the quality based on the record store itself. There are cues that record stores use to transmit where they’re knowledgeable in their expertise. I look at social media and see what they’re into, what things they feature. If they have a similar vibe to the things I like, or if they focus on a particular sound or genre that I’m interested in, it makes me trust their store more, and it makes me want to go

there. And it makes me trust their organizational system. I can go through the techno records and actually know they're techno."

For P2, who, like all participants in this study, identifies herself as a 'serious' (as opposed to casual or intermittent) collector, whether a vendor or purveyor of information about vinyl records can be considered trustworthy depends in large part on their ability to demonstrate some level of aesthetic intent and expertise. P4 uses similar criteria to identify worthwhile sources of new records and information: "I'm often drawn to smaller, hole-in-the-wall shops where you can tell the owner is an absolute music freak and has a smaller collection. That usually gets me going a bit more, because I know it's probably stuff I won't find as easily, and I'll discover new music." Although P4 appreciates the higher "accessibility" that comes with larger, more generalized record stores, she and P2 alike consider "niceness" and identifiable aesthetic specializations as markers of knowledgeability and, by extension, credibility. On this point, P6 agrees. He stated that expertise in record collecting is largely "a function of how deep one goes. The dividing line for me would be someone who has defined their collecting in an aesthetic sense that's divorced from markets. Someone who is endeavoring to do something, whether for themselves, or creating knowledge." To borrow Unruh's (1979, 1980) terms, trustworthy sources of information and, to an extent, of vinyl records themselves (vendors, traders, friends, and so on), consist primarily of those who collectors can readily identify as *insiders* of their social world. According to P1, operating as a vinyl record collector without the cooperation of this social world would constitute a much more difficult, if not impossible task:

"All of the people I know who I consider to be experts, it's always been very community-driven, and they all know each other somehow. I don't think you *have*

to be in the community to be an expert, but I just tend to find most people I know who I think are the best at [collecting] talk to each other all the time, because it's really hard to find out a lot of this information on your own. You can Google it, you can look on Discogs and things like that, but you would have to spend so much more time if you were doing it on your own. It's much faster to get it from other people through word of mouth."

In this sense, successful hobbyist record collectors prove capable of fostering thriving, largely social information networks that circulate highly specialized knowledge. Intimations of possessing such knowledge—through online and social media content, possession of uncommon records, strong displays of aesthetic specialization or intent, and beyond—serve as indications of credibility and trustworthiness in the collector's social world. Interestingly, none of the study's participants expressed overt concern for independently verifying the information received from others in the collecting community. Instead, information seems to move between collectors on currents of implicit trust. If one person recognizes another as a member of the record collecting community, that alone often proves enough to convince other individuals and groups of their trustworthiness. As P1 put it, "everyone vouches for everyone else. A lot if it is tight-knit, word of mouth, I know this person, they've been collecting for a long time." P6 approaches the issue of trust in the record collecting community even more blithely. When asked how he determines whether other collectors and vendors on Discogs should be trusted, he responded, "No way to know! In my mind, it's part of the risk."

Discussion

Through a series of semi-structured interviews, I have attempted in this study to deepen our understanding of how hobbyist record collectors seek, use, exchange, and verify information. As the objects of their collecting chiefly comprise uncommon, if not quite rare vinyl records, the participants in this study must employ specialized channels and sources of information in order to acquire them. Whether these sources take the form of online aggregators, record shops, or acquaintances in their social world, the collectors in this study expend the significant, long-term personal effort identified by Stebbins to extract from these sources the information that will lead them to additional acquisitions (1992). In doing so, study participants operate at once on discrete information and intuition: while on the one hand their hunt for new records might involve plumbing the depths of Discogs for an album's history and musical context, on the other it might just as likely comprise an in-person purchase made on the basis of an interesting cover, or a single curious song.

In many respects, the collectors in this study conform to the typology defined by Stebbins, especially those who rely on online resources and employ research-first methods of collecting (1992). Out of all participants, perhaps P1 best exemplifies Stebbins' emphasis on amassing technical and *historical* knowledge as a prerequisite to serious collecting. For P1, in fact, historical knowledge constitutes an essential attribute that distinguishes 'expert' collectors:

“Someone who's an expert is someone who really knows the history of the records they collect, and also just the history of different themes and trends in record pressing and labels. There's so much information out there about different kinds of records, and I think that knowing the history of it, and knowing 'this pressing is special because in this year, something crazy happened at the plant,

and they had to switch labels’—all those little things that are more than just about what the music is itself.”

P6, another frequent user of Discogs and other websites and aggregators, also places strong emphasis on acquiring and “creating” knowledge through committed collecting, especially knowledge centered on the relative value and rarity of records through time. But what of those participants (such as P2, P3, and P4) who deliberately refrain from this more calculated and methodical mode of collecting? A strict interpretation of Stebbins’ typology could indeed leave these collectors outside the “serious” mold, insofar as deep technical and historical knowledge remains for them a secondary or even tertiary priority (recall, for instance, P4’s characterizing her collecting as a career made up of “organic accidents”). And yet, despite this seeming divergence from the archetypical serious collector, each of the participants who prefer a more serendipitous approach nonetheless enjoy belongingness as legitimate members of the record collecting social world. Put another way, although their priorities rest more in the joy of real-world “wayfinding” (as P2 described it) and less in building formidable stores of historical and technical knowledge, these collectors are in any case recognized by their more knowledge-focused peers *as fellow serious collectors*. In this sense, Stebbins’ focus on knowledge acquisition as a prerequisite for his collector typology leaves otherwise legitimate, *serious* members of the collecting world unacknowledged (Stebbins, 1992). And yet perhaps, to a degree, such a gap should be expected: as outsiders of the collectors’ social world, our ability to levy comprehensive and correct definitions of what constitutes a serious collector might be limited without participating in such activities ourselves. As mentioned, so much of the knowledge, credibility, and recognition among

the study's participants and their fellow collectors passes between them with implicit, often unquestioned trust. In the social world of serious record collectors, like recognizes like; while one collector might possess hundreds of records of which they know little in terms of history, but much in terms of aesthetic sensibility, of what this-or-that artist sounds like, another might hold a smaller collection of one-of-a-kind, historically significant records whose history they know to an intimate degree. As proved true among study participants, both kinds of collectors would recognize each other as inhabitants of the same world, just as they would recognize those whose philosophies and methods matched their own.

What emerges here, I believe, is not necessarily a need for a new definition, a new typology of serious collecting, but a need for greater flexibility, and for humbleness as outside observers of other social worlds. To assign an overarching typology to *all* collecting communities amounts to forcing them into a mold that might prove an insufficient fit, as we have seen in the case of serious record collectors. This is not to say that Stebbins' typology contains nothing of the collector's real constitution; rather, I mean only to venture that it comprises only *some* of the attributes of *some* collecting communities. Just as collectors themselves exhibit idiosyncrasies in their philosophies and methods, perhaps different types of and objects for collecting beckon their own defining attributes and principles. Thus, to conclude this discussion with a nod to LIS research specifically, should we as LIS professionals and practitioners ever be tasked with providing service to a member of *any* collecting community, perhaps our instincts should direct us not toward learning about *all* collectors, but *this* collector, *this* community. Depending on their object and primary goals, a given collector's needs might

differ substantially from those of another. Our duty lies not in determining their legitimacy according to any one definition of serious collecting, but in connecting them to the resources they need to conduct and deepen their collecting activities according to *their* aesthetic or intellectual mission, to their purpose as a serious collector.

Limitations

Although I believe the present study's design appropriately accommodated the limited timeframe and personnel available for its completion, constructing the study in this way certainly rendered it susceptible to notable limitations. As noted, because a single researcher was responsible for gathering and analyzing the study data, the sample size needed to remain small enough that this process could feasibly and successfully occur. On their own, transcription and coding represent time-consuming processes, thus including a greater sample size would most likely have been impossible without the help of additional personnel. Beyond its time-consuming nature, coding also heavily relies on the researcher's interpretive skill and perspective and thus proves all the more vulnerable to personal biases and assumptions. Here too the study's single-person staff exacerbates matters: because the data could not be triangulated, I cannot guarantee how well the subjectivity of data interpretation might be mitigated. Nor does the study benefit from multiple data-collection methods. Semi-structured interviews comprised the only means of acquiring data, and the successful use of this method has depended in great part on the interviewer's (my) skill.

Conclusion

The findings of this study could prove valuable to multiple stakeholders. As discussed earlier, the present study (to the author's knowledge) represents the first to investigate the information behaviors and practices of serious record collectors. The knowledge acquired in its completion might constitute a novel contribution in the field of LIS, especially where it connects and communicates with leisure studies and ELIS. In her survey of ELIS research, Hartel laments the field's "somber" character and overall lack of recognition regarding leisure as a worthwhile subject (2003). To that end, I would consider the present study an attempt to expand the fruitful intersection between serious leisure and LIS. On back of this effort, it is my hope that LIS students and professionals might find in the study's results some useful or in the very least interesting insights into their own practices and perspectives on the field. Perhaps, for instance, learning more about how serious collectors find and assess information without institutional support will better prepare library professionals to serve as intermediary facilitators of their activities. Meanwhile, it is my hope that this study will encourage those interested in pursuing leisure studies to do so. As I approach the end of my study's ultimate trajectory, I find myself fully convinced that LIS research can benefit immensely by more closely investigating the ways in which serious collectors seek, assess, exchange, and employ information. These practices represent real-life, everyday contexts that inevitably inform *each and every* information-seeking event in which we participate, and thus by their very nature, they are not only relevant to LIS research, but also illuminating and vital.

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Appendix A. Recruitment Email and Consent Form

Recruitment Email

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Research Information Sheet

IRB Study #: 21-3240

Principal Investigator: Benjamin Newgard

Subject Line: Invitation to Participate in Research Study

Dear <name>,

I am writing you in hopes of securing your participation in a research study that I am conducting to complete my graduate studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In this study, I hope to investigate and better understand how collectors of vinyl records find and use information to support their activities. On account of your multiple years of experience in this endeavor, your perspective would undoubtedly constitute a valuable contribution.

Participation in the study would comprise a telephone or Zoom interview with me that would take no longer than half an hour. All interviews will be transcribed and possibly quoted in the study's published form, but **neither your name nor any other kind of identifying information will be used**. No follow-up interviews or data collection will be required.

The attached form provides additional information on the study's procedures. Should you wish to participate, please sign and return the form, which will be used to document your consented participation. Meanwhile, if you are aware of any friends or contacts who might also wish to participate, please indicate this in your response.

Thank you so much for your consideration and time. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Very best,

Benjamin Newgard

919-265-3705

ben.newgard@unc.edu

Consent Form

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Research Information Sheet
IRB Study #: 21-3240
Principal Investigator: Benjamin Newgard

The purpose of this research study is to investigate and understand the information behaviors and practices of vinyl record collectors. You are being asked to take part in a research study because you are a collector with multiple years of experience and therefore valuable perspective.

Being in a research study is completely voluntary. You can choose not to be in this research study. You can also say yes now and change your mind later. Not participating will not affect your relationship to UNC.

If you agree to take part in this research, you will be asked to participate in a video or telephone interview (depending on your preference). Your participation in this study will take about half an hour, at most. We expect that 3-8 people will take part in this research study.

As a means of maximizing data accuracy and usefulness, video and telephone interviews will be recorded. An audio file of your interview will be stored on a password-protected computer until final submission of the study, after which it will be safely deleted. Should your participation in the study end before its completion, all data and files pertaining to you will be deleted. You are **not** required to be on camera during the interview, however all prospective participants must consent to being audio recorded. **If you do not consent to being audio recorded, return this form unsigned.**

The possible risks to you in taking part in this research are:

- Minimal risks of social or emotional discomfort (with the interview context), errors in transcription of interview responses.
- Minimal risk of breach of confidentiality.

This project was determined to be exempt from federal human subjects research

To protect your identity as a research subject, the researcher will not share your information with anyone. In any publication about this research, your name or other private information will not be used.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact the Investigator named at the top of this form by calling 919-265-3705 or emailing ben.newgard@unc.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the UNC Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email to IRB_subjects@unc.edu.

By signing below, you confirm that you understand the possible risks associated with the study and establish your consent to participate.

Signature of research participant

Date

Signature of researcher

Date

Appendix B. Interview Guide

1. What drew you to record collecting originally?
2. What about the experience keeps you interested? What motivates you to continue collecting?
3. What information sources do you use to help you find records for possible purchase?
4. How do you determine whether these information sources are credible and/or reliable?
5. What attributes are important to you in determining whether to add a record to your collection? In other words, how do you determine a record's value?
6. How do you determine whether a seller or vendor is trustworthy/reliable?
7. How do you keep your collection organized?
8. How do you care for the items in your collection?
9. What, in your eyes, qualifies an *expert* collector? How do you distinguish expert collectors from those on a more 'casual' level?