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Author(s)	Malone, Sheila;Keegan, Brendan;Medway, Dominic
Publication Date	2026-01-24
Publisher	Elsevier
Repository DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2026.116012">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2026.116012</a>



## Epistemic objects and curious collectors: The revelation

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Epistemic objects  
Epistemic value  
Relations  
Community  
Knowledge  
Collectors

### ABSTRACT

Epistemic objects are defined by a continuous process of revelation through a series of engagements that complement their morphing nature. Here, epistemic value takes a central role in one's understanding of, and engagement with, consumption objects. Through 15 interviews with online collectors who used Instagram to connect with others, the findings show how epistemic objects create fundamentally different relational dynamics than traditional collecting practices. Whilst acknowledging that objects within collections can operate through seriality, we reveal how epistemic objects also operate through three distinct relational dynamics that have been overlooked in existing collecting literature: object-knowledge relations, object-community-object relations and object-temporal relations. These dynamics distinguish epistemic objects from conventional collectibles by positioning individual objects as the unit of analysis rather than a desire for completed collections. This study contributes to a growing area of research that moves away from the focus on objects as passive entities towards analysing object-oriented relations.

### 1. Introduction

While previous research in consumer behaviour has investigated objects related to mnemonic value (see McCracken, 2005), the object's past (Abdelrahman, Banister & Hampson, 2020), 'or considered special' material items that possess historical and familial significance (Price, Arnould, Folkman Curasi, 2000) and object-identity relations (Parsons, 2010), these studies tend to prioritise customer-object relations related to one's identity (e.g., Belk et al., 1988; Epp & Price, 2010). Here, person-object relations focus on consumers' emotional and symbolic relationships with objects underpinned by identity projects rather than considering wider object relations in their own right (Zwick & Dholakia, 2006a). This oversight is recognised by several studies in marketing that highlight the need to focus on non-human objects as a unit of analysis (e.g., Franco, Canniford & Phipps, 2022; Hoffman & Novak, 2018; Zwick & Dholakia, 2006b). This shift in thinking requires a reconsideration of what is under investigation towards an understanding that centralises the consumption object as a valuable analytical tool (Franco et al., 2022).

We concentrate on collectors' curious objects as continuous knowledge projects that generate a collective fascination within online communities. Many of these objects are mundane, everyday items that have

no significant market value (e.g., in comparison to rare and much-sought-after vintage items, antiques or heirlooms), nor do they represent objects of hallmarked historical significance (i.e. curatorial items). For instance, consider how a mundane 1960s plastic shopping bag from a defunct high street retailer might simulate greater human curiosity and interest than a rare and valuable designer handbag—not despite its ordinariness, but because of it. The plastic bag serves as a portal to understanding retail culture, consumer behaviour, and the social history of a particular era, generating ongoing community inquiry about life in the 1960s. It is important to note that such objects may exist within collections and possess serial relationships with other objects, yet they also generate knowledge value independently of these serial arrangements. Our focus is on revealing this overlooked dimension of object-oriented relations rather than negating the importance of seriality in collecting practices. Here, we are referring to objects that are imbued with epistemic value, that is, 'epistemic objects' (Zwick & Dholakia, 2006a), that emerge through knowledge generation (Knorr Cetina, 1999). It is important to note that epistemic objects are unique because they possess a material elusiveness—an incompleteness that invites rather than forecloses interpretation (Zwick & Dholakia, 2006a). They are, therefore, constantly evolving and open to an ongoing (re)reading of their meaning and significance. This incompleteness renders

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2026.116012>

Received 16 January 2025; Received in revised form 15 January 2026; Accepted 16 January 2026

Available online 24 January 2026

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epistemic objects as different from both valuable collectibles and curatorial objects where completeness of the set based on seriality is fundamental to the collection process.

The generating and sharing of knowledge pertaining to epistemic objects serves as a pleasurable practice that does not have any anticipated or expected monetary return. The collectors preserve, continue and contribute to an object's story, but this is not premised on a need for circulation (see Scaraboto & Figueiredo, 2015; Abdelrahman et al., 2020), or identity creation and reinforcement (see Belk et al., 1988; Epp & Price, 2010). Epistemic objects can be displayed and shared on virtual platforms (e.g., Instagram) to connect with like-minded others who also enjoy the experience of collecting and, in particular, the revealing of their objects. In so doing, objects are not simply an integral part of a consumer's lifeworld in their immediate form, instead they are objects in their own right and they come to life through the sharing of knowledge, understandings and storytelling by those whom we have termed 'curious collectors'.

We contribute to consumer research by centralising non-human, epistemic objects as a consumption category, similar to the work of others (e.g., Franco et al., 2022; Scaraboto & Figueiredo, 2015; Epp & Price, 2010). However, we take a wider view of consumption beyond the purposes of appropriation, practice and ritual as defined by consumption communities and those that support identity projects or a shared sense of kinship (e.g., Arsel, 2015; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Instead, we focus on object-oriented relations as a category of relationships that often compete with human relations (see Knorr Cetina 1999; Zwick & Dholakia, 2006a; Zwick & Dholakia, 2006b). Here, we are not concerned with what objects do in terms of *meaning associations* (e.g., identity confirmation) but about *understanding* the object itself and its relational dynamics. The motivation for this study is twofold: 1) to centralise non-human objects and address the overemphasis on identity-based object relations that marginalise objects as analytical units; 2) by introducing epistemic objects as a distinct consumption category, we focus on the underrepresented area of the epistemic and knowledge-generating dimensions of objects. Here, objects' capacity to generate curiosity, knowledge, and collective engagement independent of identity projects or economic exchange is emphasised. Finally, we prioritise mundane, low-market-value objects instead of rare, historical, or familial objects.

We use micro-level data gathered from object collectors to understand macro-level theory related to objects and relationships (Zwick & Dholakia, 2006a; Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). We show the fragility of a form of value that emerges from the symbiotic relationship between the object, knowledge generation and a community. Without such communities and their members' epistemic prowess and knowledge bases, certain objects would cease to exist.

We reveal how collectors re-energise given object meanings through epistemic value which is transacted through sharing and building narratives around those objects with others. Together, therefore, collectors can bring to life an object's temporal-spatial values through a process of revelation, unlocking and unfolding. Our study supports MacInnis's (2011) call for theoretical contributions in marketing by identifying a new perspective and conceptualisation of object-relations as a category of relationships, which is centred on epistemic value. Specifically, we offer an innovative perspective on, and analysis of, object-oriented relations and the role social media (viz. Instagram) play as platforms for unlocking and unfolding epistemic objects.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Epistemic consumption objects

The idea that objects hold an ontological weight and are irreducible to their component parts or relations is gaining momentum in consumer research (e.g., Franco, Canniford & Phipps, 2022). Objects are presented as having "properties and capacities that make them more than

consumers' perceptions or interactions with them" (Hoffman & Novak, 2018: 1180). Central to this view is the hidden depths of objects wherein "mining the[ir] secret life ... presents an enormous opportunity for consumer culture theorists" (Hoffman & Novak, 2018: 1195). These considerations are important stepping stones for revealing how objects are meaningful (Lemke, 2021) and helps advance the current, dominant view in much consumer research related to consumer-object relations. It moves beyond the meaning objects offer to consumers (consumer-object relations) towards a greater understanding of object-oriented relations as a category of relationship in itself (Zwick & Dholakia, 2006b; Zwick & Dholakia, 2006a; Franco et al., 2022).

A growing number of studies have examined objects or non-human entities that possess high epistemic value. These works include Scaraboto and Figueiredo's (2015) circulation of small chapel objects, Epp and Price's (2010) singularized objects, and Abdelrahman, Banister and Hampson's (2020) vintage objects. However, these efforts tend to prioritise the consumer-object relations underpinned by identity projects (e.g., Epp & Price, 2010) or community identity associations (e.g., Scaraboto & Figueiredo, 2015; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). The shortcoming of these studies lies in the overt attention paid to the *nature* of the consumer and their identity projects *rather* than the objects themselves.

The importance of understanding objects themselves is reflected in the works of others. For instance, Epp and Price (2010) investigate how objects transform (e.g., a kitchen table) with people (e.g., a family) based on a network of practices that interconnect different elements of the consumption activity. Here, an object's meaning is decommodified for the family when it is moved from a place of activity, such as being used in the home, to displacement (e.g., stored in an attic). Similarly, in a tourism context Byrom et al. (2024) explore how souvenir fridge magnets can assume the role of active agents in the stimulation of post-holiday memory work, due to their embeddedness within everyday domestic rhythms. Others such as Scaraboto and Figueiredo (2015) highlight the importance of how objects gain value in a gift-system through circulation practices resulting in emotional, epistemic and linking value. However, if object-oriented relations are centred on consumption practices and rituals that facilitate processes of appropriation and commodification on a personal or collective level, it overlooks the ontology of the object. As such, Zwick and Dholakia (2006a: 20) call for a new understanding "in which consumption objects of knowledge—what we have termed epistemic consumption objects—fill in for the human element". This call signals a move away from consumer-object relations towards object-oriented relations; it necessitates a shift in thinking or reconsideration of what is under investigation wherein the consumption object is viewed as a "valuable analytical tool" and the unit of analysis (Zwick & Dholakia, 2006b: 55).

Epistemic objects are "always in the process of becoming, rather than being" (Zwick & Dholakia, 2006b: 52), thus growing in complexity through "layers of revelation" equally increasing in value and elusiveness the more one learns about them (Zwick & Dholakia, 2006a: 18) and thereby changing their "face-in-action" (p. 21). As such, one could argue that epistemic objects are never fully complete and only understood at a particular space and time. They are in a constant state of revealing "themselves progressively through interaction, observation, use, examination, and evaluation" (Zwick & Dholakia, 2006a: 17), and are defined by their "unfolding character" along with "their lack of objectivity and completeness of being, and their non-identity with themselves" (Knorr Cetina, 2001: 187). Therefore, they differ fundamentally from curatorial objects in museums and heritage institutions. While acknowledging that contemporary museums increasingly adopt co-curatorial models particularly in decolonisation efforts (Byrne & Ali, 2025), epistemic objects resist such institutional framing. Unlike curatorial objects that are contextualised within expert knowledge frameworks, epistemic consumption objects depend on community-driven knowledge creation that remains perpetually open to reinterpretation. Further, museums typically aim to stabilise object meanings through expert curation,

whereas epistemic object communities embrace ongoing uncertainty and collective knowledge construction. This distinction is important because it positions epistemic objects as fundamentally different from both traditional collecting (where objects gain value through series completion) and museum curation (where objects gain value through expert interpretation).

We adopt the term curious collectors in this study to reflect those who have an appetite for learning about objects regardless of their market value. Based on Belk et al.'s (1988) description of collectors, curious collectors' collections typically come from serendipitous discoveries and incidental happenings rather than purposeful or deliberate actions. However, unlike Belk et al. (1988), many of our participants also exhibited curatorial practices in their narratives such as caring for, cataloguing and displaying objects. For this reason, we employ the term curious collectors to capture individuals who sway between both collectors and curators.

## 2.2. Consumption communities and epistemic communities

Within consumer studies, the importance of community is often grounded in the potential for market-based knowledge production, interpretation and information sharing (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). This reflects Cova's (1997) notion of linking value whereby objects help individuals experience social (tribal) connections. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and Facebook facilitate such connections, often for the purposes of knowledge generation, sharing and social support for others (Tajvidi, Richard, Wang & Hajli, 2020). Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) present the concept of 'brand publics' to capture the role social media plays as a mediation device. Their critique is based on the view that not all members engage with social media for meaningful, communicative interactions; rather, social media often attract publicity-driven consumers and support an outward-facing orientation of "documenting the self for the consumption of others" (p.744). Brand publics therefore forefront the self as the unit of consumption rather than the object they are sharing.

Abarashi and Edirisinha (2022: 1885) present "networked constellations of consumption" where objects gain meaning through relationships with other objects within bounded collections based on the seriality. Thus, the authors demonstrate how objects (handbags) acquire significance through their positioning relative to other objects (other handbags) in a collection hierarchy or network (Parsons, 2010), creating serial relationships where collection completeness drives value creation. Hoffman and Novak's (2018) work on object-object relations focuses on how objects are connected and create networked experiences via the Internet of Things. However, the concept of epistemic object-orientated relations examines how individual objects become focal points for knowledge generation independent of technological or collection connectivity. Epistemic object-oriented relations operate alongside object-object relations by generating value through acknowledging objects as incomplete. This material elusiveness invites ongoing inquiry that can exist independently of an object's position within a collection, though the two dimensions are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, discovering new serial connections between objects can itself constitute an epistemic process. Our focus, however, is on revealing how individual objects generate knowledge value in their own right—a dimension that has received limited attention in existing collecting literature despite its potential to offer a more informed understanding of consumption practices and behaviours.

The distinction between various consumption communities is important. For instance, Tajvidi et al. (2020: 476) examine how brand communities create value through shared object experiences, where objects gain meaning through "social commerce interactions" and networked brand relationships. However, epistemic objects operate through fundamentally different relational dynamics where individual mundane objects (such as a single vintage tobacco tin) become sites of collective inquiry that resist completion or seriality. For instance, a

gramophone needle tin from 1920s Japan generates epistemic value not through its relationship with other tins in a collection, but through its individual capacity to unlock knowledge about Japanese industrial culture, gramophone technology, and social practices of that era. Tajvidi et al. (2020) refer to how social media platforms facilitate brand co-creation through information sharing, though this typically serves commercial brand-building rather than epistemic inquiry. Social media platforms provide an ideal home for epistemic communities to convene as they facilitate communication that supports the unlocking and unfolding of objects through knowledge generation and sharing.

Epistemic communities resemble the shared interests of many consumption communities and may also reflect the outward orientation of brand publics. Membership of epistemic communities originates from a "shared knowledge about the nature of social or other processes, based on analytic methods or techniques deemed appropriate to the disciplines or professions they [i.e. the community members] pursue" (Haas, 1992: 16). The process of knowledge generation comes from "various stages of articulation and use but then is replaced by new analysis and information" (Knorr Cetina, 2001: 75). Interactions in epistemic community settings are meaningful due to a shared desire for epistemic value; that is, the value of knowledge, curiosity, learning, novelty and discovery (see Sheth, Newman & Gross, 1991). Accordingly, knowledge is co-created with many individual experts who share similar interests (e.g., collectors), leading to an ongoing evolution of object meanings, interpretations and understandings over time (Zwick & Dholakia, 2006b). Here, authority comes not from the ownership of objects as such, but from a willingness to engage in collective knowledge construction about objects that resists definitive interpretation.

## 3. Methodology

The focus of this study is the object as an epistemic 'thing' of consumption (Zwick & Dholakia, 2006b). Based on the work of Nordstrom (2013) and object-focused interviews, we centralised the object as the unit of analysis (i.e., object-relations) and the collection practices that this entails. This recognises that "subjects and objects are entangled" (Nordstrom, 2013: 246) and provides the basis to "elicit people's own accounts of their things" (Woodward, 2016: 372). Our approach also helps to overcome subject-object binaries by placing the very substance of objects at the core of the inquiry and "involves not only unearthing the significance of objects to their owners, but also, importantly, investigating the biography of the object itself... revealing an object's materiality, biography and practice" (Hall & Holmes, 2020: 2/3).

Participants (n = 15) were recruited via Instagram through a multi-stage process designed to identify active collectors engaged in knowledge-sharing practices around mundane objects (see Table 1). Initial recruitment proved challenging, with direct contact attempts to Instagram accounts yielding no responses. We therefore adopted a strategic hashtag-based approach and searched for collecting-related hashtags (e.g., #vintagecollecting, #everydayobjects, #collectorsofinstagram, #vintagefinds) to identify potential participants who demonstrated active engagement with their collecting communities. From this wider pool, we identified collectors who exhibited all of the following characteristics: (1) significant active followers, indicating an established community presence; (2) regular posting activity focused on mundane rather than high-value collectibles; and (3) discursive comment threads on posts, suggesting that meaningful knowledge exchange rather than purely visual display was present. The recruitment process then evolved into a modified snowball sampling approach, wherein initial participants who agreed to participate suggested additional collectors within their networks who represented significant voices in their respective collecting communities. This approach proved particularly valuable as it allowed us to identify collectors whom the community itself regarded as knowledgeable contributors to epistemic discussions about objects. Participants selected an object (or objects) from their collection as the basis for the interview. Using objects in this way offered agency and

**Table 1**  
Participant profiles.

Participant	Gender	Age Range	Location	Primary Collection Objects	Years Collecting	Instagram Followers	Collector Community Role
Declan	Male	50–60	UK (England)	Various vintage: silverware, postcards, ephemera	35+	500–999	Knowledge contributor
Michael	Male	50–60	UK (England)	Toys, TV/Film memorabilia	40+	1,000–5,000	Nostalgia curator
Barry	Male	60–70	UK (England)	Vintage UK product packaging	45+	1,000–5,000	Historical documenter
Dan	Male	40–50	UK (England)	Horror film and TV memorabilia	30+	1,000–5,000	Pop culture archivist
June	Female	50–60	UK (England)	Vintage toys	35+	50,000+	Community hub
Conor	Male	40–50	US (East Coast)	Cereal boxes	25+	1,000–5,000	Packaging historian
Cian	Male	60–70	Singapore	Japanese gramophone needle tins	50+	10000+	International connector
Edward	Male	40–50	Canada (Ontario)	Cereal boxes	20+	1,000–5,000	Brand heritage specialist
Noel	Male	40–50	US (West Coast)	Discarded shopping lists	15+	10000+	Everyday life documenter
Ellie	Female	50–60	Japan	Gramophone needle tins	30+	1,000–5,000	Industrial culture expert
Jack	Male	40–50	US (Midwest)	Sweet wrappers	25+	1,000–5,000	Childhood memory keeper
Jackie	Female	50–60	UK (England)	Plastic shopping bags	30+	1,000–5,000	Retail historian
Joe	Male	70–80	UK (England)	Boot polish tins	55+	1,000–5,000	Typography expert
Kate	Female	50–60	UK (England)	Vintage pottery & Tupperware	35+	1,000–5,000	Domestic material specialist
Josh	Male	40–50	US (East Coast)	Cigarette packaging & cycling paraphernalia	20+	1,000–5,000	Sports heritage curator

control for participants as they had the freedom to select any things they wished to talk about. The interviews were conducted online via Zoom/Teams, lasting on average 40 to 60 min. After the initial discussion of the object(s), the conversations were supported by an interview protocol as a guide to keep the conversation focused (see Table 2). All interviews

**Table 2**  
Interview protocol.

Object Focus	Tell me about the object you have chosen Why did you select it for today's conversation? What does it mean to you? How would you describe how you feel when you see this item in your hand versus online? What kind of reaction did it get when you posted it online?
Collecting process	When and how did you become a collector? When did you start using social media How did social media change things (collecting)? Tell me about how you decide what to post? Tell me about what type of things do you like to post (is there a pattern)? What are you most proud of with your collections?
Objects of consumption	Tell me about the objects you collect? What is the purpose of collecting e.g. (things to show off, or things to talk about)? Tell me about why you chose such mundane items? Tell me about your relationship with the objects you collect? Do you share knowledge/ideas/ information with others and their objects that you see online? Which is more important, the object or the interaction with followers?
Knowledge in collector communities	Do you follow other collectors? Do you learn from others and if so, what kind of things? Is it important that you learn things from others Tell me about the object(s) and knowledge production and creation with others. Tell me about sharing knowledge and what it means for your collections? What kinds of things do you learn from followers? What kinds of things do you find important to share? How do you feel when you learn something unusual/unexpected/weird/unique from others? Tell me about how Instagram compares as a leaning tool than other formats e.g., search engines (open conversation about community focus)
Wrap up	What is the future for your collections? If we can go back to the object you selected, what does the future hold for it? Thank you so much for your time today. Is there anything else we haven't covered that is important for me to know about collecting?

were video recorded (with cameras on to enable discussion around presentation of participants' interactions with their objects during discussion) and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Data were also gathered through systematic observational study of participants' Instagram accounts over a three-month period. This observational component involved: (1) documenting the frequency and nature of posts about objects; (2) analysing comment threads to understand how community members contributed historical information, expertise, and collective interpretation; (3) tracking hashtag usage to map how collectors created networks with others interested in similar mundane items; and (4) noting the visual presentation of objects and accompanying narrative descriptions. This process provided a crucial context for understanding how epistemic value emerged through community interactions. Observational notes were maintained in a research diary. Screenshots of representative interactions were captured (with participant awareness) to supplement interview data.

Using the Gioia method (Magnani & Gioia, 2023), data were analytically coded, organised and structured into 1st order (informant-informed) and 2nd order (theory-centred) themes and aggregate dimensions, leading to the presentation of findings in the following section. An overview of the data structure can be found in Fig. 1. First-order codes emerged directly from participants' own language about their objects and community interactions. Second-order themes, through theoretical abstraction, elevated the relational dynamics between collectors, objects, and communities rather than individual collecting motivations. The dual data sources (interviews and observational material) were analysed iteratively, with observational data serving to contextualise and validate interview accounts of community knowledge practices. Lastly, with the permission of the participants, and for the benefit of the reader, Fig. 2 presents a montage of the objects collected and curated by the participants. As the foci of the present study are highly visual in nature, this presents an overview of epistemic objects as well as the way they are presented to, and consumed by, their respective communities.

#### 4. Findings

Our analysis reveals how epistemic objects create relational dynamics that operate alongside, and sometimes independently of, traditional collecting practices. Whilst not negating the importance of customer-object relations (Abdelrahman et al., 2020), object-to-object relationships (seriality) within collections (see Abarashi & Edirisingha, 2022; Parsons, 2010), or object experiences (Hoffman & Novak, 2018), epistemic objects also operate through three relational dynamics that have received limited attention in existing literature: object-knowledge

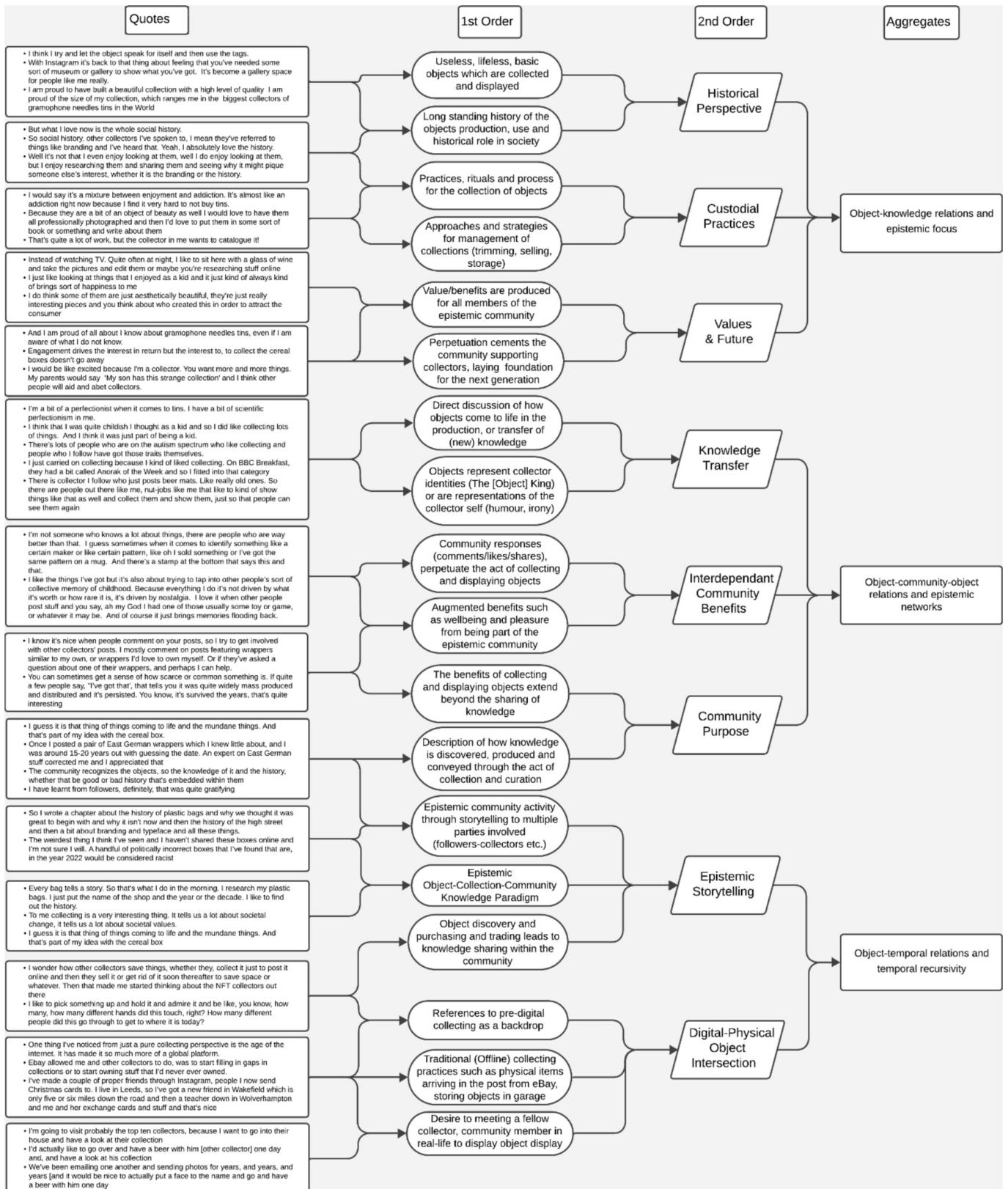


Fig. 1. Data analysis structure.

relations, object-community-object relations, and object-temporal relations. These relational dynamics distinguish epistemic objects from conventional collectibles by positioning individual objects as the focus rather than completed collections.

#### 4.1. Unlocking: object-knowledge relations and epistemic focus

Epistemic objects generate knowledge value through their individual material properties and historical traces. This creates a focus on the

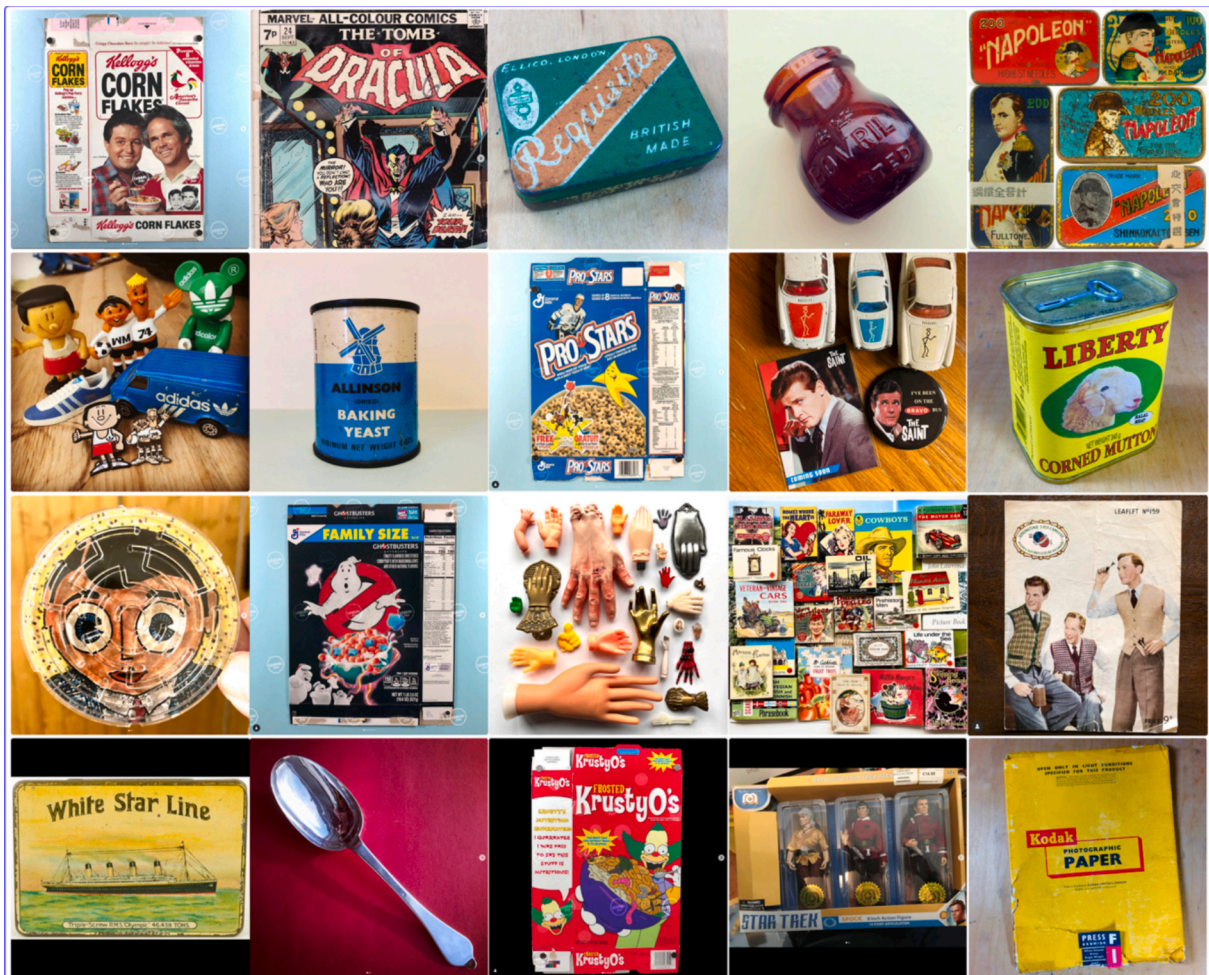


Fig. 2. Montage of epistemic objects shared on Instagram.

singular—where each object functions as a self-contained portal to knowledge generation rather than gaining meaning through serial relationships with other collection items. As Kate explains, “I’ve never been someone who thinks, oh I need every teapot made by this maker”. Equally, June claims her collection of objects “is not very logical”. It is important to acknowledge that these object-knowledge relations can coexist with serial relationships within collections. An object may simultaneously possess value through its position within a collection *and* generate independent epistemic value. Indeed, the discovery of new serial connections—such as learning that multiple tins in one’s collection were sold on the same shipping line—can itself constitute an epistemic process. However, our focus here is on revealing how individual objects function as singular portals to knowledge generation, a dimension that operates irrespective of whether that object exists within a wider collection structure. This distinction matters because it reveals that epistemic value is not solely dependent on collection completeness or object-to-object relationships. To illustrate, Cian’s relationship with individual tobacco tins demonstrates a singular focus where, instead of deriving meaning from the completeness or arrangement of his collection, each tin creates direct object-knowledge relationships through its material traces:

“My collection represents 50 years’ worth of collecting. I often wonder where this little tin has been. It’s been somewhere for 120 years. It’s either been tucked away or passed through at least more than one generation. Some of these would have been passed through three generations. I really appreciate the history of them ... they used to sell tobacco tins on transatlantic ships, passenger ships—all the

White Star Line—those famous ships—the Olympic, the Majestic—they would sell cigarettes on those ships to their passengers. I found all these old black and white photos of what it was like to be on one of those ships; you know, the state rooms, the dining—because that’s where those people would have sat while they were smoking those cigarettes out of that tin. What I tried to do was to take something that’s in today’s context, which is the actual physical tin, and to put it back into its time of what life was like when that would have been the latest hot item. I actually really enjoy the fact that I’ve got it all catalogued online. I can share it with other people because the physical tins themselves are all packed away in little plastic bags and hidden away. I don’t have any on display because I’ve got too many” (Cian).

Observational data further confirmed object-knowledge relations in this instance, showing how followers engaged with individual tins via comments that centred on specific historical details that helped unlocked the hidden depths of objects. Cian’s efforts reflect a sense of duty to protect and preserve the wholeness of the object by celebrating and promulgating its history, thereby acting as a purveyor of the past similar to that of curators (see [Belk et al., 1988](#)). In reanimating the object, he is continuing its existence and its life in the present. Central to this process is the role Instagram plays in (virtually) housing a large collection of objects that would otherwise be impossible to exhibit and share, thus re-establishing its presence in today’s world. Cian’s actions also demonstrate a desire to create an object-knowledge relation through a legacy effect whereby a historical story is shared on social media. His narrative reveals how an individual tin’s epistemic value

extends far beyond its physical properties or collection context. This tin becomes a site of inquiry into transatlantic passenger culture, class dynamics, and social rituals of the early 1900s. Crucially, this knowledge generation is not dependent on other tins or an understanding of the relationships between tins (object-object relations). Thus, the tin functions as a singular entry point into historical knowledge networks. The relationship here differs fundamentally from seriality logic where objects gain meaning through their relationships with other objects in a collection (see [Abarashi & Edirisingha, 2022](#)). Rather, in this instance a single antique tobacco tin represents an object-knowledge relation where the object's physical traces (manufacturer marks, design elements, condition) directly generate historical inquiry independent of the completeness of Cian's collection. In this regard, the object-knowledge relation creates a temporal recursivity where the object simultaneously exists in its original 1900s context and a contemporary knowledge-seeking context.

For most of our collectors, the objects they chose to discuss have little financial worth, but they are abounding with epistemic value based on their origins and history. Collectors seek out ordinary, everyday, mundane objects, but through revealing their past these become captivating and compelling. This reflects a transition of the profane to the sacred ([Belk et al., 1988](#)), which materialises because of an interest-based purpose within a community rather than a market-orientation driven by commercial intent ([Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001](#)). Accordingly, our participants take pride in setting their objects in a historical context, thereby helping to ensure they continue to exist over time through the manner in which they are presented, catalogued, observed and talked about in the narratives of both the collectors and their followers. For instance, Conor states: "I can tell you roughly when it was released but I don't know the history behind it". In short, these narratives are a means by which the objects of focus become meaningful in today's world.

Jackie's plastic shopping bags demonstrate an emphasis on single objects where each bag functions as an independent gateway into the history of retailing rather than gaining meaning through relationships with other bags:

"I like the idea of the Instagram being a window into it [history]... it's a whole social history of retail, the face of the high street and how it's changed. It's the way we used to live. What's really interesting is that in my 20s the majority of bags that I had were either off-licenses, book shops or record shops. Now, how many record shops do you see? We don't have them, do we? You don't really have many independent off licenses 'cos we all get it in the supermarkets; they are just not there anymore... I absolutely love the history and occasionally you post a bag, like there's an iconic record shop in [place name removed], and suddenly you get people who used to shop there who comment on it and that gives me pleasure because it's their memories and the history of the way we shopped" (Jackie).

Jackie's bags create object-knowledge relationships that generate inquiry into the transformation of the retail sector, urban geography, and consumption practices across past decades. The epistemic value emerges not from having a comprehensive bag collection but from the capacity of each bag to unlock temporal-spatial knowledge. A single bag from a defunct record shop becomes a knowledge node connecting personal memory, urban history, and cultural change. It reflects relations between the object and historical knowledge rather than between objects within collections. Instagram interactions also demonstrated this type of object singularity as followers responded to each bag's unique retail story rather than its relationship to other bags in a collection.

[Miller and Fox \(2001\)](#) claim there is no grand storehouse of knowledge, but an object can "make people think about the history of something" (Barry) and can stimulate the remembering of "lost artefacts" that "need to be preserved" as "they all tell a story" (Josh). In many cases, the objects we encountered in our study represent a longing for the past and a reminiscence where "things aren't made like that anymore... kids

don't know the joy of sort of opening the cereal and finding a little plastic figurine of Sooty or you know... it's just stuff of a bygone age" (Dan), "they are things related to the past and to the heritage of the industrial era" (Ellie). In this regard, the collectors we observed play a curatorial or conservator role in taking care of their object(s). Thus, Edward claims "I'm a custodian of it", whilst Joe feels he is "saving a bit of history". Similarly, Noel states:

"The problem with eBay is that when three to four months pass by, it's [i.e., the object] gone from eBay. You can't look up items that were sold more than about three or four months ago. So, you can't really use it as a knowledge base because stuff has just gone. So, it's just not useful... I just started rescuing them, it's a survival story" (Noel).

Unlike other studies in consumer research that predominantly focus on consumer-object relations related to the self-concept ([Zwick & Dholakia, 2006a](#)), the emphasis here is firmly on the object itself—"it is all about the object, not me" (Declan)—and how the objects are unlocked through a shared defining and redefining process. In turn, this facilitates the discharge of previous interpretations and understandings about a given object, allowing them to be replaced by new ones (see [Zwick & Dholakia, 2006a](#)). Here, an object's ongoing layering of knowledge represents its complexity ([Zwick & Dholakia 2006a](#)) and evidences an increase in epistemic value that is never complete. This object-oriented relations based focus challenges traditional collecting logics where value accumulates through serial acquisition ([Abarashi & Edirisingha, 2022](#)). Instead, we see how epistemic objects possess a value that is independent of a wider collection context. Further, that value arc remains forever incomplete as further object-knowledge relations continue to unfurl through a perpetual and indeterminate knowledge unlocking process that is facilitated by collectors as curious and investigative curators.<sup>1</sup>

#### 4.2. Unfolding: Object-community-object relations and epistemic networks

Collectors' engagements in epistemic communities are grounded in more purposeful interactions than those presented by [Arvidsson and Caliandro's \(2016\)](#) brand publics, or other online communities that are market focused. Here, a sense of purposeful togetherness is present wherein the objects are understood through interactions with others based on shared knowledge and knowledge co-creation, and not commercial, financial or brand gain. Epistemic objects create community relationships that recursively enhance understanding of those objects themselves, thus generating epistemic networks where knowledge flows between objects, community members and enhanced object interpretations. These networks differ from consumption communities by positioning objects as a focal point for the purposes of knowledge generation and allowing those objects to actively shape community formation rather than serving as vehicles for social connection ([Cova, 1997](#)). For instance, Joe's boot polish tin demonstrates a recursive object-community-object dynamic on Instagram whereby the tin itself creates community relationships that loop back to transform object knowledge:

"I love the interaction that I get with followers and other collectors and dealers from all over the world and that's the thing that drives me. Just how many people in other countries are like-minded... I'm not that knowledgeable, but there's one person who's a follower that knows all about type and print and tells me the dates... There's another woman that collects all sorts and she's very knowledgeable on all sorts of things. Like she'll tell me the collectability of a tin, and

<sup>1</sup> Sooty refers to a glove puppet character from a British children's television series called *The Sooty Show* which was produced from 1955 to 1992.

she can age it, so she helped me with the ageing of those tins... Then people ask me questions, and I'm determined to find the answer" (Joe).

Joe's excerpt demonstrates a relational flow from i) the object (mysterious tin), to ii) an online community forming that provides typography expertise, dating analysis and historical context, to iii) enhanced object understandings, to iv) new questions that further expand the online community's knowledge. Accordingly, Joe's tin is not simply part of his collection but actively creates knowledge relationships that extend beyond mere object ownership. Other participants' Instagram accounts involved similar object-driven knowledge interactions with likeminded curious collectors. This reflects [Zwick and Dholakia's \(2006a: 8/18\)](#) concept of "face-in-action" and how objects change because of knowledge generation. Although Joe modestly refers to himself as "not that knowledgeable" even though he strives to answer questions posted by followers and fellow collectors, he reveals a connectivity between object, collectors and the community—demonstrating how epistemic objects offer an "unfolding entity" ([Zwick & Dholakia, 2006b: 42](#)). Barry echoes Joe's sentiments as he talks about his learning experience and the continual revelation of a given object. Barry's "requisites" tin reveals how objects create community relationships that fundamentally alter object meaning through collective interpretation:

"I had a little metal tin, and I had it for years and years and it said 'requisites' on it and I didn't know what it meant, but then someone then told me that requisites are the old, polite word for condoms. I'd had this tin all the time and never knew... People do share knowledge, and you find things that you think that people would never even notice, you find that other people like them, and other people know about them" (Barry).

For Barry, the object is "ill-defined with respect to the direction it will take at the very next moment and in the less immediate future ... what the object will become" ([Zwick & Dholakia, 2006a: 21](#)). The tin's epistemic value does not derive from its relationship to other tins in Barry's collection but from its capacity to generate community knowledge relationships that can enhance understandings of social history and linguistic practices—object-community-object relations. Here, the community interaction does not only add information to the object but transforms that object's knowledge-generating capacity. Barry's requisite tin has become more epistemically valuable after his interaction with the community because it unfolded broader historical inquiry about life and material culture in a previous era.

For others, Instagram is a place where posting objects presents a mutual ground to communicate with others and in some cases, friendships are formed with former users of the objects. For instance, Josh collects professional cyclists' jerseys. He states:

"You're able to connect with people that you would have never met; unquestionably, your lives would have never crossed if it wasn't for the internet... You just get to learn, people post, people ask questions, you know, information gathering and information sharing... it's just another avenue to help expand learning... So, I displayed professional cyclists' jerseys in my collection, and they tend to comment on the jerseys, and then obviously when they comment on it then there's significantly more engagement by others. Sam [a professional cyclist] posted his jerseys, and I was a fan of his. I met him and we developed a connection, he commented on it, I sent a message, and the friendship grew kind of organically through social media channels" (Josh).

The connection made between collectors and followers can result in online friendships that emerge due to common interests and a desire to share not only the object, but also knowledge with others. Relationships made are premised on object-community-object relations and interdependencies between collectors and how they evolve over time through a two-way give and take process. Here, epistemic networks

demonstrate how objects create relations and the role they play in shaping community formation wherein knowledge creation is beyond social connection alone (c.f. [Cova, 1997](#)). Put simply, objects create communities that recursively enhance object understandings by generating expanding knowledge relationships that exceed traditional collecting boundaries.

#### 4.3. Unfolding: Object-temporal relations and temporal recursivity

For the collectors in our study, each object has a past that is beyond its historical detail alone and based on its journey through time. The object's story is revealed through a continuous process of exploration and discovery, and from stories ([Zwick & Dholakia, 2006a](#)) that unfold from "a collective memory" (Michael) of things like childhood experiences. Epistemic objects thus create complex relationships across temporal dimensions through community interpretation. This amounts to a form of temporal recursivity, where objects simultaneously exist in multiple time frames while creating knowledge bridges between past experiences, present community engagement, and future research potential. Here, storytelling plays a role in keeping the objects (and the past) alive (see also [Scaraboto & Figueiredo, 2015](#)). A point of difference must be noted with respect to the strategic and controlled use of storytelling for commercial purposes in advertising and marketing campaigns, and to how stories are an integral and often a messy part of the unfolding of an object's journey through time. In terms of the latter, objects create relationships that collapse boundaries between personal memory, collective memory and historical documentation. For instance, Michael states:

"There is nothing better than stuff that's got somebody else's childhood imprint on it [i.e., toys]. I think it enriches your love of and relationship with the item because you're actually looking at somebody else's piece of history... It's also about trying to tap into other people's collective memory of childhood. Because everything I do, it's not driven by what it's worth or how rare it is, it's driven by nostalgia... It just brings memories flooding back... I mean I think there is probably a childlike wonderment and awe that is still part of me, and it is, it is still part of me... The majority of times it might well be the story and what it represents and what it evokes from your own childhood, or what it conjures up in other people's minds... I suppose some of it's making you feel young again as well" (Michael).

Michael's narrative demonstrates object-temporal relationships that move between the past (original childhood use), the present (community memory sharing) and the future (historical preservation). [Couldry \(2008: 374\)](#) talks about digital storytelling and the use of photographs as "a novel distribution of a scarce resource—the ability to represent the world around us—using a shared infrastructure". It moves beyond entertainment alone to facilitate greater understandings and learnings about objects. The objects do not simply represent past experiences, but they actively generate temporal connections through community interpretation. When Michael posts a toy with "somebody else's childhood imprint," he creates knowledge relationships that connect individual memory with collective memory practices, transforming personal objects into shared temporal artifacts. The observational data shows how comments from followers present a type of temporal bridging that connects personal childhood memories with collective historical understandings. Thus, Michael describes how the objects come to life in his mind and that of his followers based on the memories they invoke.

[Hannam and Ryan \(2019: 436\)](#) state that memories are "enveloped within our understandings of time and temporalities", and in the case of our study participants act as "drivers of memorialization", making the past more consumable ([Anderson & Hamilton, 2024](#)). For instance, although storytelling situates the object in its origin past, it also keeps it alive in the present. This form of temporal recursivity differs from nostalgia because the objects actively generate historical knowledge rather than simply evoking emotional and affective responses.

Declan describes a mundane vintage knitting pattern and how its background story and epistemic value unfolded and was enriched through knowledge sharing on Instagram:

“I put a knitting pattern up... and it had three guys on the front... It has a very kind of 1950s look to it. And one guy was playing darts, another was drinking beer out of a tankard, and they were wearing these knitted cardigans in a 1950s style. I put it up on Instagram and then a couple of people who'd saw it noted that one of the guys in the image was a very young Roger Moore, as in the James Bond actor, and that he used to be a model. Some of the objects that have been posted on Instagram have gained additional value in my mind because of the community of people who look at it and what they then say about it” (Declan).

Declan's knitting pattern represents a site of complexity wherein the object exists simultaneously in multiple temporal relationships—1950s knitting documentation, contemporary collecting interest, 1970s and early 1980s James Bond celebrity culture artifact, future research resource about modelling industry history, etc. This temporal recursivity demonstrates how epistemic objects create fluid knowledge relationships where past, present, and future become open resources for ongoing inquiry rather than fixed temporal frames. For others, such as Dan, his beer mats illustrate how objects can create temporal relationships between personal memory and historical preservation:

“I'm always being told on Instagram that they love my stuff because it reminds them of when they were kids and growing up and all that kind of stuff. And that's why I like it, because it reminds me of my childhood... My dad used to take me to this little village pub, and they used to just give me loads of beer mats because I was a kid. And things like that are just kind of forgotten. No one remembers that kind of thing anymore... I just like to have stuff like that because it kind of keeps the memory of it alive.” (Dan)

Rheinberger (1997) talks about the historicity of objects as a continual learning process through which those objects become known, often revealing new and interesting aspects about their nature. For Barry, an object's story can provide it with depth and value:

“There's a packet of drinking straws that I got in a charity shop just down the road in about 1985 and I love them. They're Winfield, which is the Woolworths brand, and they're just so colourful and so of their time and such a lovely find. I'm really glad that someone hasn't thrown them out and that no one else has bought them. But I'm just so happy that they've survived for 40 years or something in some back cupboard and then they haven't just been chucked out in a house clearance, and they've been passed on to me” (Barry).

Instagram plays a significant role in refreshing and developing this historicity of objects, and an “identifiable story behind them” (Cian), rather allowing object-related knowledge to be eroded by time. And as Barry illustrates, a sense of generational shift is expressed when objects are acquired, or “passed on” like an inherited gift, in a way that reignites object-temporal relations and temporal recursivity.

## 5. Discussion

This study contributes to an emerging area of work that theorises epistemic consumption objects as a focal point of analysis (e.g., Franco et al., 2022; Epp & Price, 2010; Scaraboto & Figueiredo, 2015). The findings advance our understanding of consumption by repositioning objects from passive entities in consumer-object relations to object-oriented relations as a distinct category of relationship (Zwick & Dholakia, 2006a). Through an examination of curious collectors and their epistemic objects within Instagram communities, we reveal how mundane items transcend traditional collecting logics to generate value through knowledge creation rather than acquisition or identity construction.

Based on the works of Zwick and Dholakia (2006b), we embrace the object's ontological properties and focus specifically on the nature of the object, its intrinsic features, hidden depths and epistemic value. Our findings demonstrate how epistemic objects operate through three interconnected relational dynamics that have been overlooked in existing collecting literature. Importantly, these dynamics can coexist with seriality and other collection-based value creation processes, though they operate through distinct mechanisms that warrant independent theoretical attention. Object-knowledge relations establish individual objects as singular portals to historical inquiry, independent of collection completeness or seriality arrangements (c.f. Abarashi & Edirisingha, 2022). Object-community-object relations create recursive networks where collective interpretation transforms object meaning whilst simultaneously generating new uncertainties. Object-temporal relations enable objects to exist across multiple temporal dimensions, collapsing boundaries between past experiences, present community engagement, and future research potential. These relational dynamics challenge the established understanding in the literature on collecting (e.g., Scaraboto & Figueiredo, 2015; Abdelrahman et al., 2020; Epp & Price, 2010) by inverting traditional value hierarchies. Where conventional collecting seeks completion and market appreciation, epistemic objects derive value from their material elusiveness and capacity to generate ongoing inquiry (Knorr Cetina, 2001). This represents a fundamental departure from both seriality-based collecting practices (Abarashi & Edirisingha, 2022) and expert-curated museum objects, positioning epistemic objects within community-driven knowledge platforms that resist institutional framing.

We do not argue that epistemic object-relations replace or negate seriality-based collecting practices. Rather, we reveal an additional dimension of object-relations that merits theoretical attention. Collectors may simultaneously value objects for their serial relationships (i.e., their position within collection hierarchies or networks) and also for their individual epistemic qualities and capacity to generate ongoing inquiry. Indeed, discovering how objects connect to others in a collection can itself be an epistemic process, as collectors learn about manufacturing variations, distribution patterns, or design evolution. Our contribution lies in identifying and theorising how individual objects generate knowledge value independently of their serial arrangements—a process that operates whether or not the object exists within a collection structure. This dimension has been obscured in the predominant focus on seriality in the collecting literature, yet it proves crucial for understanding how mundane objects become sites of collective knowledge construction in digital communities.

The findings offer a view of epistemic communities that differ in terms of focus and purpose from other online and collector communities. First, the focus of epistemic communities is on the object itself and its relational dynamics rather than consumer-object identity or meaning associations or relations. Second, epistemic communities are interest-based where no real market orientation exists, or brand associations are expected; they are primarily concerned with epistemic value and knowledge generation. Therefore, a unique feature of epistemic communities stems from the continuous process of revelation and discovery because of an object's material elusiveness (incompleteness), its hidden depths, and its changing face-in-action that results in a process of layering complexity, which Zwick and Dholakia (2006a) refer to as unclear and ill-defined.

Zwick and Dholakia (2006a: 35) talk about the importance of “consumer recognition of the object of consumption as an object of knowledge” and although this is logical within the context of its community members, it is not always the case or possible as not all objects will have an epistemic value that can be unlocked (e.g., certain archaeological items due to a lack of knowledge). Although collectors' desire for such objects is because of their incompleteness and lack of objectivity, it is not simply a case of taking mundane items and putting them to unexpected (re)uses (see Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry, 1989), but quite the opposite. Objects are placed in their intended context

historically and in a narrative form. Collectors go back-and-forth between the objects, their stories, histories and the knowledge offered by other members. This process allows *mundane* objects to transmogrify, thus giving them new life in today's world. Thus, the collectors of those objects automatically create a synergistic body of object-centred knowledge within a wider community of mundane object enthusiasts and, although no *official* back catalogue or "grand storehouse" of knowledge (Miller & Fox, 2001: 675) exists, a stock of knowledge within the community pertaining to a given object rapidly emerges and forms.

Finally, the findings of this study extend Franco et al.'s (2022) call for object-oriented marketing theory by demonstrating how objects actively shape community formation rather than merely serving as vehicles for social connection. Our conceptualisation of object-relations as a category of relationship advances Zwick and Dholakia's (2006a) foundational work by empirically revealing the relational mechanisms through which epistemic value materialises within digital collecting communities. This addresses MacInnis's (2011) framework for theoretical contributions by offering a new perspective that centralises objects as analytical units whilst revealing their hidden depths and knowledge-generating capacities.

### 5.1. Practical implications and future research

There are several practical implications emerging from the findings. First, marketers and brand managers must recognise that even mundane or obsolete brand artifacts (e.g., packaging, receipts, shopping bags, catalogues) can function as epistemic objects that stimulate curiosity and collective meaning-making. Objects are not solely vehicles of brand identity or equity; therefore, brands owners can treat objects they have produced as portals to cultural, historical, and experiential knowledge that invite exploration and reinterpretation. This incomplete nature of objects renders them with an ongoing, and arguably limitless, capacity to generate interest that extends and evolves beyond the point of their initial purchase or ownership (see Malone, Tynan and McKechnie, 2023).

Second, our study shows that fascination with objects often arises because they are ordinary, not despite it. Therefore, brand managers can promote curiosity by highlighting overlooked design details, materials, or practices, or curate and resurface everyday historical artifacts from brand archives. This approach shifts storytelling away from prestige and rarity toward authenticity, curiosity, and cultural insight, which may resonate strongly with niche and heritage-oriented audiences. Whilst brand heritage initiatives inherently involve a form of seriality (objects connected through the same brand), our findings suggest that individual historical objects—a specific 1960s Coca-Cola bottle design, a particular Kellogg's cereal box from a regional market, or a Levi's jean from a specific production year—can generate knowledge value in their own right. Brands with historical depth such as Kellogg's, Coca-Cola or Levi's can engage with epistemic communities through knowledge stewardship that respects both the serial connections between products and the unique epistemic qualities of individual objects. By supporting community members' documentation efforts and providing archival access, brands can foster authentic brand engagement that respects the organic knowledge generation processes that are central to epistemic value creation.

For marketers and brand managers, our study suggests a shift from managing consumer identities to cultivating object-centred knowledge ecosystems, where value emerges through curiosity, collective storytelling, and ongoing engagement with even the most ordinary brand artifacts. Brand managers and marketing communication teams could also encourage greater brand engagement underpinned by unveiling an object's story through user-generated content and viral campaigns that have the potential to unfold and unlock epistemic value. For example, brand owners can set up digital platforms that encourage collectors to document historical packaging variations or production methods, with the provision of archival resources used to enhance community

knowledge creation. Although some work exists on the storytelling of retro brands (Brown, Kozinets & Sherry, 2003), it is the epistemic value that should take centre stage rather than the mere relaunch of an old brand. Consequently, relational dynamics should be unpacked through the unlocking and unfolding actions of consumers, such as curious collectors, who are doing so because of genuine interest in a brand's lost story. Brand managers and marketing communication teams can build on these findings by embracing the work of curious collectors as the starting point for future marketing launches and campaigns that have the potential to become viral. It is important for brand managers to recognise that the epistemic dimension operates through the object's capacity to generate ongoing questions rather than provide definitive brand story closure.

The findings provide a stepping stone for future studies to investigate how epistemic object-relations manifest across different cultural contexts and media platforms (e.g., Tik Tok where temporal dynamics may operate differently to Instagram). The role of material elusiveness in other consumption categories also merits examination, particularly where objects resist definitive interpretation or completeness, e.g., the enduring power of mystery in the consumption of art such as the Venus de Milo statue where its incompleteness invites imagination, interpretation and ongoing discussion, making it more than just a representation of beauty. Although some brands have leveraged their hidden features such as Coca-Cola's secret formula, there is also a market opportunity to leverage epistemic consumption objects that are designed incompletely thus promoting a space for epistemic product design as a co-creative process between companies, brands, consumers and collector communities. This could include products with intentional historical references, regional variations, or production details that reward investigation over time. Thus, future studies should prioritise objects of consumption as a focal point for investigation that embraces their material elusiveness and epistemic value. Additionally, longitudinal studies can trace how epistemic value evolves as objects transition between different community contexts or gain institutional recognition. Studies of this nature can examine the co-creation or destruction of epistemic value (Malone, McKechnie, & Tynan, 2018).

Finally, a greater understanding of the layers of knowledge and revelation linked with epistemic objects, and what this means for marketing and consumption practices in terms of communications, product development and technology warrants further attention. A particular focus here might be on the accuracy of knowledge itself, especially in a post-truth era, and a deeper consideration of what the marketing implications might be when epistemic value is built upon unintentional falsehoods or deliberate untruths.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Sheila Malone:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Brendan Keegan:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Dominic Medway:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Acknowledgement

The authors would like to acknowledge and thank Professor Robin Canniford for his input and review of the manuscript.

## Funding

There is no funding statement required.

## Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained by the lead author's institution and consent forms were completed by all participations.

## Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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