

# Making sense of the self: developing an understanding of the role of objects within the reading experience<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** In understanding pleasure reading in everyday life we often focus on the text as a primary tool of reading and other tools, such as books, which are instrumental objects, are overlooked. This report of qualitative research focuses on the book as a tool within reading experiences and how it furthers understandings of the self for the reader.

**Résumé :** En tentant de comprendre la lecture de loisir dans la vie quotidienne, nous considérons souvent le texte comme l'outil principal de lecture, alors que d'autres dispositifs, tels que les livres, qui sont des objets instrumentaux, sont souvent négligés. Ce rapport de recherche qualitative est axé sur le livre comme outil à l'intérieur des expériences de lecture et sur la manière avec laquelle celui-ci favorise la compréhension de la personnalité du lecteur.

## 1. Introduction

People bring items into their lives and surround themselves with things. These things or objects may be understood as cluttering spaces or more positively, as filling spaces with symbols that have meaning for the individual who owns or interacts with them. Readers of books (and other reading materials) often continue to keep, collect, display, and interact with books and reading materials after the text is read or even if the text is never consumed. These books are kept, exhibited, and used as objects of appreciation and are employed for meaning-making within the reading experience. This book as object holds significance for the reader as it reflects identities and through this process helps to project an image of the self.

The investigation of the meaning of objects in the lives of people is significant to Library and Information Science (LIS) and everyday life information themed studies. In our current understanding of pleasure reading within everyday life we most often focus on the text as a tool of reading and focus on the ways in which readers use a text to aid in the development of meaning-making within their own reading experience. The book, which can be characterised as a 'thing' or object is often overlooked as an important element of the reading experience, perhaps because books generally are considered an inert object or a thing which does not dictate action or does not help to formulate opinion, whereas the text is seen as a significant actant or tool in the practice of reading.

Wayne Wiegand (1997), a LIS scholar, calls for further studies to investigate reading practices as related to information behaviour. Although this call enforces thought away from the perception of information as object, this current research project asserts that the whole reading experience, including manipulation of the book as object, is significant in developing an understanding of information garnered or projected by the reader. Changes to understanding the scope of the reading experience have occurred in prior scholarly work. For example, the reading experience is not only seen to involve one reader and a text as some suggest (see Kennedy 1984; Bloom 2000), but is seen as including a wider social sphere of people (see Long 2003). As reading is perceived to not

only involve one person, it cannot be alleged to only involve the manipulation and interpretation of a written text, but the experience of reading also involves the use of an object, commonly understood as a book.

This paper reports findings from a larger qualitative study that investigates the pleasure reading experiences of adult lesbian women and the relationship between these women's solitary and social reading practices. This work focuses on the emerging finding that explores the meanings behind the objects or books reflected on by the women readers within the study. It asks: What is the significance of the book as object in the lives of lesbian women readers? And it explores the meanings behind acquiring, storing, keeping, and not keeping books in the lives of adult lesbian women and how these meanings affect the way in which the self is perceived.

## **2. Literature review**

From recent a Canadian Heritage government publication, we know that roughly one Canadian out of three buys at least one book a month and that an average of 62 per cent of all books bought are purchased for the buyers themselves (Canada 2005). Yet, we do not have a great understanding of the meaning behind the desire for these objects in the lives of the purchasers. In the domain of LIS, some work has been completed which explores book ownership and collecting from a children's perspective (McKechnie 2004) and other work explores the objects within the adult pleasure reading experience as related to the theme of community (Pecoskie 2005). Book history scholars have examined collections of adult readers and have commented on their significance, yet much of this research has taken a decidedly historical approach. Petroski (1999), for example, demonstrates how the increased availability of books over time has transformed readers into owners and book collectors and Erler (2002) examines book ownership in the lives of late medieval religious women.

Sociologists examine objects in relation to identification-themed research. Knorr Cetina (2001, 525), in an examination of a postsocial environment, suggests that object-centred environments which situate and stabilise selves work to define individual identity. Exemplars in which objects help serve as a marker for identity include Appadurai (1986) who explores commodities and commodity signs, Rubenstein (1995) who investigates clothing, and Martorella (1989) who studies art.

To further determine meaning around the keeping of objects, two other bodies of literature are significant to this piece of research and they include the work around material culture and consumer research. These areas of study reflect similarly on the meaning of possessions or material items that humans collect or keep. Both areas suggest that things or objects help to reflect a sense of identity or a sense of self onto the possessor. The premise of material culture is that the objects that humans surround themselves with reflect "consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of the individual ... and by extension, the beliefs of the larger society to which the individuals" belong (Prown 1993, 1). Belk (1988, 139), a consumer researcher, suggests that a key to understanding what possessions mean is to recognize that individuals regard possessions as parts of ourselves, where our sense of self needs support in the form of things or objects.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi crosses these disciplinary boundaries with his work titled *The meaning of things: domestic symbols and the self* with Eugene Rochberg-Halton (1981). In this work, the authors discuss how the keeping of treasured or special household objects, including books, reflect as well as shape the pattern of the owner's self (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, 17). For adults in their study, books symbolised the values and tastes as well as the accomplishments of the owner. They show that materialism blossoms because of the need to solidify the consciousness of the self into tangible objects, such as books.

The difficulty confounding the definition of book as an object must be addressed. Alberto Manguel asserts that “[t]he association of books with their readers is unlike any other between objects and their users. Tools, furniture, clothes – all have a symbolic function, but books inflict upon their readers a symbolism far more complex than that of a simple utensil” (1996, 214). The book holds a dual identity – it is an object, yet it contains a text and both elements of this thing are open to interpretation. David Ayers (2003, 759) cautions his readers away from defining a book as a material object as the text encased in the book cannot be straightforwardly conceived as a material thing. Whereas, D.F. McKenzie (2002, 190) suggests that the book as a physical object “is not in any sense ‘finished’ until it is read.” The editors of *The book history reader*, David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (2002, 1) assert that the book is distinct in “both its emphasis upon print culture and the role of the book as material object within that culture.” Although there is little concurrence in the definition of the book as object, for the purposes of the study I accept these blurred lines between material object and text as the editors listed above do, yet understand and put forth that the book can be explored as an element of material culture; as a thing that is open for interpretation.

### **3. Method**

This research is a piece from my doctoral dissertation research, which at the time of this writing is still on-going. The material presented in this work was gathered during two data collection periods: May to August 2004 and October to December 2005. This project looks to preserve the voices of the participants and to faithfully reproduce their stories so that continued marginalisation of this segment of the larger population is not perpetuated (Lincoln 1993, 35-6) in research. To ensure that participants' voices are captured, a qualitative investigation of the reading experiences of adult lesbian women was engaged to examine reading from the perspectives of the women and through their own terminology. Evidence for this study originates from data collected through open-ended and narrative style interviews with 11 women who self-identify as 1) readers who read for pleasure, and 2) lesbian or bisexual<sup>2</sup>.

Participants were selected by their personal acknowledgement of their reading practices, in that they self-characterised themselves as readers. It is important to note that in the scope of this study none of the types of materials read are privileged over another; what is most significant is that the women choose reading as a pleasure activity. Many of the women acknowledge that they read books of both fiction and / or non-fiction genres and some of the women also discuss reading magazines, graphic novels, and comics. At the time of data collection participants ranged in age from 25 to 75 years, and all had completed some type of post-secondary education, including but not limited to college, undergraduate or graduate work.

During the interviews readers were asked to talk about the following: their reading practices; what is typical of their experiences, tastes, and habits with books or other materials, and of their reading process. They were asked to talk about books that matter to them and to their lives. And about what they do with the books that enter their lives. This method of eliciting dialogue is appropriate for the study of experience as it is participant-centred. The interviews, which were conducted either face to face or on the telephone, were audio-recorded and subsequently fully transcribed or full field notes were made during and immediately after the completion of the interview.

I analyzed the data set of interview and field note scripts using a grounded theory approach. The coding guidelines from Strauss and Corbin (1998) were followed to identify emerging themes. The coded themes were compared and contrasted between the transcripts and field notes. This method of analysis resulted in a set of themes unique to my research problem, one which I have identified here for further exploration.

#### **4. The meaning of the book as object**

One theme emerging from this on-going project focuses on the book as object in the reading lives of adult lesbian readers. Understanding the book as object is significant as the participants were attentive to voice their experiences with this type of object with me. This book as object theme emerged from reflecting on the women's conversation about what they do with their books, how they treat them, and how they keep them. From the data, I came to understand that this object acts as a conduit conveying the message of the identity (-ies) of the possessor / reader. Stets and Burke (2003) argue that the self is organised into multiple parts or identities, therefore it is from these identities conveyed through the object we see a reflected image of self. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) indicate that household objects, such as the book, are representations of the self, and therefore comprise a symbolic ecology within the home. Participants detailed three significant identities that help to construct an expression of their selves; these include the identities of being a reader, of ones' own personal history and life experiences, and of marking one's community.

##### **4.1 Identity as readers**

One identity that is illustrated by participants' interaction with the book as object is the identity of being a reader. All of the women I spoke to kept books in their lives in some way, even if this meant only keeping a few. Many women store books on bookshelves scattered around their homes. Marion<sup>3</sup> declares that her books and bookshelves are kept in the more public arenas of her home. Similarly Julie mentions that books are throughout her home, yet some genres are sheltered away from prying eyes. Tracy, who at the occasion of our conversation did not have a lot of time for pleasure reading, discloses that she keeps a stack of books by her bedside even though she has not touched them in over a year. Sara articulates her need for books throughout her life by enthusiastically declaring "books surrounded me – and books still surround me!" The significance behind interacting with these objects is important as it helps to ground the women's identities as readers.

Three women in particular did not choose to keep many books around them in their homes. Hannah does not collect books and she refrains from this practice for health

reasons. Hannah has a small collection of 15 books that she keeps tucked away in storage which she is unable to get rid of. Sara, although she acknowledges that she is surrounded by books, does not keep many books in visible places in her home. To access pleasure reading materials she is a heavy user of the public library and at the time of the interview she reflected that she had about seven or eight books lying around her home. Although Sara did not have a book with her the afternoon when we met, she told me that it is usual practice for her to carry a book around with her as she goes about her everyday existence. The reading objects that are kept by both of these participants are reminders of these women's reading experiences and as such, their unique identity as readers.

Chloe is a self-described minimalist, and she chooses not to buy and therefore not to keep many books in her home. She was clear to tell me that she does have a few books that she cannot part with. One of these books that she keeps close to her tucked away in a plastic bag in a drawer within her home is the first book she ever read on her own. During the interview Chloe reflects on this book, which she says is now falling apart:

“... it's the story of Ant and Bee and it was the first thing I read. A tiny little cardboard book and I still remember how it starts, 'One day Ant and Bee were flying above when they heard a noise...’”

Chloe's parents travelled from their overseas home and presented her with that book during a visit. This object works to remind Chloe that she is a reader and has been from very early on in her life.

The practice of either keeping living spaces full of books or only keeping a few books around allows the participants to see themselves as readers. This identity is reflected from the interactions with these objects. Through the variety of methods these women choose to interact with books, we see one way in which the self is organised – through the identification of themselves as readers.

## **4.2 Reflecting one's own history**

A second identity that is demonstrated through the interactions with the book as object is related to the development of an understanding of one's personal history. Participants surround themselves with books as reminders of their own unique histories and life experiences. In essence, the presence of these objects in their lives told a variety of stories about their lives. More specifically, these reading objects told of women's personal histories and learning experiences, and of their cultural history.

The objects kept or stored by women reflected where their lives have taken them and chronicled their personal experiences. Amber effectively described her need to keep books near her by saying “so if you look around [at the books displayed in her home] you can see that's where I was at that particular time and that helped me to see this in a different way, yeah.” It is significant to use the object as a marker of place and time to remember what life was like and to aid in the documentation of one's personal history.

Sara spoke a length about the meaning of keeping books within the scope of her life. This is a woman who feels surrounded by books and she told me that she has approximately 35 boxes of books in her home, yet as noted above she has very few books visibly about her home. She feels as though she is unable to either un-box them in order

to display them or to “throw them away” (Sara) because she is still affected by a shift in her career and these books act as a reminder. Sara details another example of a geology textbook, a remainder from her university years, which she still owns and keeps around. Sara mentions that surrounding herself with these types of familiar items acts as a “grounding” for her. During the course of this part of our conversation, I offered a reflection on her collecting practice:

Jen (researcher): It almost sounds like they’re a touchstone for, for life?

Sara: Yeah, I think that’s an excellent way to put it.

Keeping objects near oneself is shown here as a method of recording personal experiences and memories and the women I spoke with used this method to document this segment of their identity.

Participants did not only use the book as object to mark their personal history, but one woman in particular used the book to denote her own cultural memory. Chloe was not born in Canada and she forthrightly identifies as being South African. As noted in the section above, Chloe does not own many books, but she does keep a few titles surrounding her, especially books written by South African authors because as she says, they are “something that gives me a sense of my roots.” Both of these women’s practices of keeping these objects close to them affirms Akin’s (1996, 112 -13) assertion that collectors amass items to make connections with the past, including ties to one’s personal experiences or one’s homeland or nationality. And the assertion of these identities helps to organise and understand meaning about the greater self.

### **4.3 Marking community**

The book as object also mirrors identification with a wider reading-related community and as such works to help make sense of the self. Reflection on the data set indicates that participants use objects as artefacts of their own existence and they happily and willingly pass them onto others. Not only do these objects act as artefacts for the self, but they reflect one’s identification with a community that the self is connected to and identifies with a wider social sphere. Belk (1988, 147) notes that relationships with objects are never two-way (person-thing), but always three-way (person-thing-person)” and George Herbert Mead (1934) acknowledges that the self is only possible in the presence of others. The book as object then acts as an artefact remembering the community that participants belong to, and as such these objects act as a ‘time capsule’ for future generations of readers.

The community I am referring to and that participants referred to is the lesbian or queer community. Participants spoke about the process or desire of donating books for members of the queer community (or the wider community) to access for public consumption. In particular two participants discuss donating books to a growing gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer collection located at the Pride Library at The University of Western Ontario. Sara told me that she a box of books that contain queer themes set aside to donate to this collection. Kathy too, has established an on-going donation collection that is formally recognized by this library. When talking about what donating materials to this collection means to her, Kathy says,

“we need these, [they] are the stories of our lives. [What w]e can do for our community is to leave these writings and I agree with them ... I know that these books will be there, I could pass them on to my [family] but somebody is going to throw them out [The Pride Library] isn't going to throw them out, they're in a collection in a library and somebody is going to have to do something with them somewhere and that's all that matters to me.”

Kathy furthers this by saying, “I guess I have a sense of history” and she chooses to preserve it through her interaction with objects. By donating books to larger collections both women note their special attachment to these objects and use them to connect with a wider community and to forge wider, perhaps imagined relationships with members of this community.

These three identities that participants demonstrate via their interactions with the book as object, including identifying as readers; acknowledging and asserting personal life-experiences and cultural histories; and identification of membership in a wider social sphere, denote representations of the participants greater selves.

## 5. Discussion

In developing a greater understanding of the identities projected through the book as object, we are able to make greater sense of the self or individual reader. Reflection on this emerging theme of identity projection as related to understanding the self within the data set reveals that the interaction with books aids in the understanding of identities. The interactions that these lesbian women have with the books that intersect with their lives help to demonstrate that objects do reflect messages and act as a conduit for information.

This discussion of the interaction of people and objects and the objects' role as artefact can be rationalised through Mead's (1934) theory of symbolic interactionism. Mead discusses the importance of human relationships with material or physical things. Although material things are often considered mute, whereas other humans are capable of communication, this theory allows for a response to be generated within the individual that is something other than direct communication and these are *interactions*. Within the reading experience, the reader / possessor is able to interact with the book in a dual fashion, as the definition of the book as a concrete item of material culture is imprecise. The two manners in which interaction occurs are: 1) through reading and interpretation of the text and 2) through association and use of the object, and these can be seen as mutually exclusive. Therefore, the book communicates via the print culture and material culture worlds. These interactions permit one to make meaning about the objects allowed into one's life world and these include reflections about understood identities and how these identities help to constitute the greater self.

This article reflects on the interactions of adult lesbian readers with their books within their everyday life worlds and extends the boundaries of reading research, which often overlooks the book as object in favour of the interpretations of the text. This shows that tools other than the text, such as the book as object, are at play and relevant within the reading experience. As this is an on-going study of a small number of participants, readers are cautioned about the applicability of results to a wider sample of experiences.

I am continuing to work with these results within the scope of my dissertation research, which focuses on the relationship between solitary and social reading practices.

The meanings behind the objects that people surround themselves with and choose to interact with should continue to be of interest to LIS researchers as these things or symbols work to convey information. Readers continue to interact with books, by reading them, keeping or collecting them, exhibiting them, and sharing them. Therefore, the acknowledgement here that the book is a material object that holds and conveys meaning of identities of the reader and these objects help to project a greater image of the known self is significant.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Participants in this study are generally referred to with the identifier 'lesbian'. Many of the participants adopted this handle easily, whereas others preferred the term bisexual, gay, or queer. This is written here to give voice to these other markers of identification.

<sup>3</sup> All of the names attributed to participants are pseudonyms.

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