

the little things



What is a Trinket?

The popularity of trinket collecting has reached a new height with Labubus, Sonny Angels and Jane Birkin-esque behaviors, but this fad is nothing new, and (really) what's new about that? Before the current wave of this cycle, trinket OG's were obsessing about Beanie Babies and Shopkins, and a whole lineup of mini companions.

Something else has also remained the same. Trinkets kept the ability to rouse positive emotions in their collectors, and their value as tokens of connection between the people which exchange them.

Trinkets are traditionally defined as small ornaments of little value, but we'd argue that high-end collector's items are also trinket in form. All of these items hold a sentimental

value and meaning beyond themselves and their price tag, and shape those who own them. Why and how do we attach so much meaning to these objects? Psychology steps in to explain the sentimental value of these trinkets and the relationships between us and them.

Trinkets at the U

Bag charms, little toys and the odd long-kept paper crane all have one thing in common: More often than not, their owners have some pretty cute stories to tell.

For Isabella Garcia, a sophomore at the University of Miami, reminiscing about the circumstances surrounding her acquisition of a small red heart with a voice box reminds her of true friendship.

"An old friend recorded my favorite song at the time and a message saying how much she loves me on this little heart recorder thing for my birthday. It makes me happy to think that I impacted someone enough for them to go to that length to show me how much they cared for me."

The same is true for Alexandra Paz Paz, sophomore at the University of Miami, who shared the story behind a toy red Porsche 918 Spyder she received from her mother.

"It's a small toy car my mom bought me when I first got into cars. I didn't realize it would mean so much at the time, but now it does. It reminds me of when that interest

The perfect addition to a **performative arsenal** or the result of **authentic gathering of mementos** through life, trinkets shape their collectors. Keep reading to explore the connections between **trinkets and the humans who collect them.**

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▶ **TRINKETS CAN BE ANYTHING** — a stuffed animal, a worn-down letter from a loved one or an old sock you just can't bring yourself to throw away.



▶ **ONE MAN'S TINY TRASH** is another man's tiny treasure.

turned into something real, like when I fixed my first car by myself two years ago. I keep it on my shelf, and every time I see it, it makes me think about how far I've come from that first spark of curiosity. It's just a little car, but it represents something bigger."

Trinkets serve as fixtures with which we communicate love to one another and devotion to our hobbies. These little items carry big responsibilities in reminding us of our identities daily, while also being really cute to look at. The nostalgia behind trinket collecting isn't lost on us either. Trinkets bridge our pasts and our presents — and provide some serious ammunition in the performative context.

What Does Psychology Have to Say?

Psychologists offer multiple phenomena which aim to explain our connections to — and occasional obsessions with — trinkets and collectibles. In episode 315 of "The Psychology of your 20's" host Jemma Sbeg (2025) explains that trinkets like the Labubu surpass their value as toys or figurines to become collective tokens of connection — "cultural touchstones."

Sbeg explains that many brands use tactics which manipulate our wants. Through manufactured scarcity, brands profit off our reactions to limited drops and moments of anticipation. This business model aligns with trends which thrive on social media. Identities defined through "ballet core" or the "clean girl aesthetic" lead us to purchase items which emulate the personalities we want to portray.

Psychologist Henry Tajfel developed the social identity theory, which suggests that humans seek to enhance their self esteem (in part) by identifying with an in-group, a group with shared interests or identities.

Sbeg argues that "according to social

identity theory, we really derive a lot of our self esteem from group membership... collecting and displaying trinkets, it reinforces a connection that you have with a certain type of person. it is by actively participating in trinket culture, you're basically saying, I'm part of this group."

Even unique trinkets reflect this desire, mirroring and defining our identities and relationships in the physical realm around us.

The design of many collectibles fosters a response which psychology can also explain. HerCampus contributor Mariana Salvador Goncalves, explains that our brains release oxytocin and dopamine — neurotransmitters and hormones associated with producing feelings of happiness — when we see cute trinkets.

"The most popular trinkets have one thing in common: their 'cuteness' factor. This is purposely done because our brains are hardwired to respond to cuteness, a phenomenon called 'baby schema' which was originally coined by ethologist Konrad Lorenz."

Goncalves continued, "We, humans, also have fundamental needs for comfort, a sense of identity and connection which run deeper than conscious awareness, and trinkets fit right in. Not only do they touch on our childhood selves...providing us with a sense of comfort, but they also showcase who we are and what our interests are."

It's Never Just a Trinket

Psychologists may define trinkets as comfort objects, identity markers or tools of belonging — but for most of us, they're just proof that something mattered enough to keep. In a culture which constantly pushes our generation to move on, trinkets stop us and remind us who we are. 📌

