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‘Everything’s a pound here, come and ‘ave a look!’: fandom and the car boot sale

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ABSTRACT
Cutting through social, cultural and racial boundaries, the car boot sale appeals to those who are involuntarily excluded from mainstream commerce as well as to groups who simply enjoy the freedom provided by a marginal retail space. Gregson and Crewe’s work from the late 1990s and early 2000s remains the most detailed study of the event; however, changes to the social and cultural climate suggest that a re-examination of the sale’s enduring appeal is long overdue. This article provides an updated assessment of how the car boot sale functions in an age of economic and social uncertainty and considers what specific pleasures and opportunities it offers attendees.
The article combines the critical framework of fan studies with ethnographic research in order to discuss the ways ‘booters’ accumulate and exchange fan cultural capital, engage in acts of collecting, and foster thriving communities through attendance and consumption. The article transforms the author’s ‘lived experience’ into an examination of the complex cultural practices that occur throughout the car boot sale. In highlighting the roles skill, knowledge and expertise play in the successful navigation of the event, the work draws attention not only to the manner in which boot fairs allow for feats of dispossession and consumption, but also how these acts enable attendees to develop and affirm significant and meaningful social identities.

KEYWORDS
Car boot sale, fandom, second-hand consumption, fan cultural capital, collecting.

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“Everything’s a pound here, come and ‘ave a look!” booms across the asphalt as hundreds of excited shoppers vie for space. They rummage, they delve, they shift and sort; digging through piles of clothes, crates of cutlery and boxes of knick-knacks in the hope of uncovering a treasure. Cutting through social, cultural and racial boundaries, the car boot sale appeals to those who find themselves involuntarily excluded from mainstream commerce as well as to groups who simply enjoy the freedom provided by a marginal retail

space (Petrescu and Bhatli 2013; Guiot and Roux 2010). Governed by a series of unspoken rules, sales operate independently from the norms that regulate fixed retail environments and allow for acts that have long been formalised elsewhere, such as haggling and bartering (Williams and Windebank 2001, p. 16). Throughout the week, thousands of people excitedly descend upon designated fields, carparks, disused patches of wasteland and school grounds to partake in this strictly ritualised form of second-hand consumption.

The car boot sale's format is deceivingly simple. It is a temporary market, held in a public place, wherein non-professional sellers tout their unwanted goods from pitches outside of their cars. While some might make a living from the practice, it is, for most, one step in a wider dispossession cycle, alongside donating goods to charity or visiting the local dump. On the other side of the stall, buyers are attracted by the space's random array of goods and the chance of finding a bargain. Although the modest nature of the car boot is part of its innate pleasure, this work shows that the boot fair is actually dependent on a complex interplay of various cultural practices—including knowledge exchange, identity formation and community bonding—and that the straightforwardness of its composition belies its social-cultural significance.

In terms of academic study, Gregson and Crewe's work from the late 1990s and early 2000s remains the most dedicated study of the car boot sale. The pair highlight the social side of the event, stating it is a space "for quasi-fun, quasi-leisure, quasi-work activities" (1998, p. 50). Whilst their work remains important, changes to the social and cultural climate suggest that a re-examination of the event's enduring appeal is long overdue. Since the pair's pioneering work, internet shopping has altered consumption habits, leading to store closures on the British high street; recycling and sustainable shopping has come to the forefront of mainstream consciousness; fallow land that has previously been the habitat of sales continues to be sold off to housing developers; acts of restoration and bargain hunting have become common tropes on television; and mass gatherings have been outlawed and reopened as part of COVID-19 rulings.

This article uses the critical framework of fan studies to offer a unique insight into the specific joys and opportunities the car boot sale offers attendees in an age of economic and social uncertainty. A fan studies approach is curiously absent from the existing scholarship, even as the event compels its patrons to engage in so many of the pursuits that have come to define fan activity. In selecting three areas fundamental to fan studies—fan cultural capital, collecting, and community—I present an enriching investigation of the car boot sale while alluding to the ways this particular form of second-hand consumption can be framed as a fandom.

As Jenkins (1992, p. 1) explains, fan theorists explore how individuals relate to the object of their fandom and draw upon it as a resource in their everyday lives. My works seeks to respond to recent trends in fan scholarship, which has centred on how fans interact in the physical space and refuse certain technological advancements. Zubernis and Larsen (2018, p. 207-8) suggest attention should be given to "analogue practices of performing fandom after several decades of focus on digital and online practices" as individuals enact their practiced self-identities differently when in physical communities. Bennett's (2017, p. 130) work on Kate Bush fans also speaks to this return to the analogue, as she notes that even as "technology pervades much activity in fandom, it is not always embraced, and can be refused in powerful ways". As will be discussed throughout this work, the car boot is, to borrow Zubernis and Larsen's (2018) term, an analogue space, which demands actualised participation and real-world embodiment. While some participants digitalise their attendance by sharing their purchases on TikTok and Instagram, the majority of attendees adopt a low-tech approach to their consumption, using phones only to check prices or save a fellow 'booter's' contact details. This Luddite approach to fan activity makes car boot sales a useful case study to those interested not only in analogue fandom, but also in how second-hand consumption practices have restarted following the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic. The boot sale's continued popularity is a sign of the broader resilience of second-hand consumers and the extent to which the circulation of second-hand goods is embedded within contemporary consumption practices. As the sales attendance starts to reach numbers similar to prior to the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic after a noticeable—yet understandable—decline, the car boot sale's persistence illustrates the attendees' high level of devotion and commitment, therein justifying the use of a fan studies framework.

Equally important in this article's use of fan theory is the recent work of Hills (2017, p. 878), who notes that there are "a series of possible ways of doing fandom" and calls for scholars to look past self-declared fans towards those who undertake fan-like activity while failing to acknowledge their own fandom. Later, in response to the overwhelming focus of fan writings on popular culture, Hills (2018, p. 608) once more calls for a reassessment of what can be explored under the fan studies umbrella. Although it could be argued that the car boot sale is part of popular culture, its spread reaches far beyond the widely held belief that fandoms are only composed of admirers of media, sports and music. In response to Hills' call, I propose here that the car boot sale is one of his 'ways of doing fandom', and as such, position the car boot sale as a site in which attendees express fan-like tendencies regardless of whether they recognise their actions as those of a 'fan'.

The car boot is as much about the social experiences as it is about commerce. In order to address this, I merge fan studies with ethnographic methodology. Like those who have

studied the car boot sale's American equivalents—the flea market and swap meet (Sherry, Jr. 1990; Belk, Sherry, Jr. and Wallendorf 1988)—I have immersed myself within the car boot space, attending sales, partaking in acts of buying and selling, and observing the rituals common to my fellow 'booters'. I have gone to sales early and started late, frequented new and established events, and taken friends and family to their first fairs. I chatted and joked with attendees, haggled and bargained, and eavesdropped on conversations between old friends, new rivals and circuit regulars. I bought items, photographed, shared and recorded my buys, and stored objects in various nooks and crannies around my home. Although this data, like much ethnographically gained information, is tainted by the subjectiveness of the 'lived experience', the familiarity gained from becoming an active member of the community is vital to fully comprehending the event's appeal. In the work that follows, I will transform my lived experience into a discussion of how the car boot sale can be positioned as both a fandom in its own right and an arena in which others 'do' fandom. By exploring how attendees use cultural capital, collect objects and interact with their peers, I suggest that fan studies is the most suitable framework for achieving a thorough understanding of the car boot sale's persistence within a society that has seemingly moved on from the tangible pleasures it promotes.

'IT'S ALL CHEAP, AND IT'S ALL GOTTA GO!': THE CULTURAL POSITION OF THE CAR BOOT SALE

The history of the car boot sale is shrouded in mystery, although the story of Stockport's Father Harry Clarke seeing similar sales while on holiday in Canada before hosting his own to fundraise for his church remains the most enduring and widely believed. Said to have originated in the UK in the 1970s, the simplicity of the format caught on and grew in popularity throughout the 1980s and beyond. In recent times, the practice remains popular and is slowly bouncing back from mandated closures following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before discussing the acts of fandom that occur within the site, it is useful to consider the car boot sale's social character and cultural status. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Bourdieu (1984, p. 1) suggests that "cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education". Although his work is increasingly difficult to apply to a media landscape dominated by cultural omnivores who consume a range of outputs from an array of taste communities, there is little doubting the lasting impact of Bourdieu's work. In creating a social hierarchy based on cultural activities, Bourdieu weaponised taste to further strengthen deep-rooted divisions between rich and poor, educated and uneducated, and the upper and lower classes. If we are to apply Bourdieu's (1984, p. 7) ideas to the car boot sale, the event fits into his description of the lowbrow, which he brands as "lower, course,

vulgar, venal, servile—in a word, natural—enjoyment".

Akin to the swap meet, the boot sale has been seen as a space that caters to a 'lower class' of shopper and vendor (Belk, Sherry, Jr. and Wallendorf 1988). Similarities between the sale and Ayres' (2019, p. 131) work on American Goodwill bins are abundant, as she claims that the smell, grime, noise, and commotion 'all combine to make [shopping the bins] an overwhelming affront to most senses and standards of decency'. Although I would be mindful of painting such a bleak picture of the car boot sale, there is no doubt that dirt and filth play a part in the acts of rummaging that define the shopping experience. In order to find that potential treasure, buyers must be willing to thrust their hands into the unseen depths of dusty boxes or shift through piles of stained clothing. Of course, certain stalls achieve a far more refined character; however, as Hetherington (2004, p. 165) states, the boot sale has historically been seen as an 'untrustworthy conduit – it is "dodgy"'. Whilst work in the area of second-hand consumption has suggested that this class-based assessment is misleading (Belk, Sherry, Jr. and Wallendorf 1988), the image of the car boot sale as a space of deprivation—and at worst criminality—remains in the public consciousness.

Gregson and Crewe (2003) discuss the deep-rooted nature of this cultural perception, noting that car boot sales became undesirable for three reasons: the dubious nature of the sellers and their goods; the threat they pose to the high streets; and their seemingly unregulated escalation. In doing so, they highlight that much of the negativity surrounding the boot sale centres on the perceived disruption they cause to local facilities and traffic. Whilst Gregson and Crewe focus on the regulations that shape the presence of the sale in any given place, I propose here that the practice continues to be ostracised due to their locales being either 'too beautiful' to accommodate an occasion such as a car boot, or 'too ugly' to host anything of worth. As mentioned, the sales tend to occupy fields either ripe for future development, or areas that are useless, barren and unsightly; abandoned airfields in the middle of industrial estates or repurposed car parks. Of course, some car boot sales take place in more picturesque settings. For example, the Country Market Sale in Bordon sits in the middle of idyllic rural hills and in close proximity to the South Downs—one of only fifteen National Parks in the UK. Yet, I would suggest that to an outsider—a non-fan—the car boot sale becomes a squatter in these areas of natural beauty and national significance. As Phillips' (2007, p. 288) work on class in the British countryside shows, many rural areas have undergone a process of "gentrification" and have consequently become more middle class. This lends the landscapes a sense of distinction as rurality becomes synonymous with ideas of peace and escapism. Although Phillips rightfully warns against oversimplifying this issue, there is little doubt that the British countryside is often perceived as a space far removed from the urban landscape's potential criminality, squalor and degradation. Gregson and

Crewe (2003, p. 32) note the manner in which the sales disrupt a portion of the English middle classes, and I suggest that the same is true nearly twenty years later. As an inhabitant of both locales, the fair becomes either an obtrusive presence in otherwise rural utopias or an example of further urban recklessness, disorder and waste.

The event's social character is further shaped by the types of items for sale. The unabashed celebration of 'cheapness' at the car boot sale, typified by the presence of signs that read '50p on the mat' or overflowing boxes marked '20p each item', feeds into wider stereotypes surrounding second-hand consumption. Although some second-hand consumption spaces have come to enjoy a middle class respectability—such as the American garage sale, which offered suburban housewives opportunities to undertake acts of charity within their local communities (Le Zotte 2017)—Hansen and Le Zotte (2019, p. 2) point towards the need for many consumers to push back against "long-propagated xenophobic, anti-Semitic, and classist stigmas". Unlike the more refined spaces of the antiques fair, the car boot sale is framed as a dumping ground for the unwanted, the discarded, the tacky and the kitsch. While stories of people finding rare masterpieces and expensive heirlooms at car boots form part of its folklore, the event's inherent simplicity casts it as far cruder than other second-hand shopping spaces. Its temporal nature invites a sense of chaos, as cars and vans are unpacked as quickly as possible in order to maximise selling time. Most sellers emphasise volume of stock rather than the luxury and selectiveness that dominate highbrow retailscapes. Similar to Ayres' (2019, p. 131) description of Goodwill shoppers as "cutthroat patrons", 'booters' forego restraint in fear they might miss out on that elusive item. The space is one of hustle and bustle, of cutting in and potential rudeness; it embraces the dirty and the grimy, the unpolished and rusty. It is a raw and inelegant experience—perpetually unfinished and provincial—and thus easily cast aside as trivial and frivolous.

'YOU GOT YOURSELF A BARGAIN THERE!': FAN CULTURAL CAPITAL

Fiske (1992, p. 33) claims "fandom offers ways of filling cultural lack and provides the social prestige and self-esteem that go with cultural capital", whilst Jenson (1992, p. 9) goes further, claiming a fan's obsession with a particular cultural artefact was often seen as a sign of abnormality, obsession and deviance. While these ideas have become easier to challenge as more previously fannish practises become mainstreamed, their echoes still have the power to form opinion and shape representation. While more recent work has moved away from notions of deviance, fandom is still framed as "an effective strategy to cope with everyday life . . . and can also be a powerful means for individuals and groups to cope with adversity and exclusion" (Linden and Linden 2017, p. 44).

Ideas of deviance, cultural lack and exclusion align neatly with the car boot sale's enduring position as an often misunderstood phenomena on the margins of 'official' culture. The car boot is, to revisit Fiske (1992, p. 30), a "shadow economy", not just with its own set of economic values, but also with its own social and cultural merits. As expected, its underdog status effectively strengthens emotional bonds to the event. Presence at the car boot sale becomes a badge of honour and signal of rebellion, a marker of difference and originality. Key to this is the manner in which the sale allows the attendee to accumulate, perform and present what Thornton (1995, p. 11) calls subcultural capital. A direct inversion of cultural capital, Thornton's concept removes the class barriers that defined Bourdieu's work and instead concentrates on how 'being in the know' about various forms of low and popular culture provides an individual with a tradable sense of self-worth. Often seen as a way to make up for the lack discussed by Fiske, subcultural capital is fundamental to understanding how people interrelate and grow within fan communities. Although Thornton's work remains central to understanding the ways 'booters' navigate the car boot space, her focus on subcultures can be misleading in a space which accommodates such varied attendance. Rather, I use Chin's (2018, p. 330) conceptualisation of fan cultural capital, which considers fandom as a field whereby whom the fan knows, which community in fandom they are members, and what they contribute or produce are exchanged to accumulate social and cultural capitals. Thus, otherwise ethereal and subjective can be turned into a measurable and important marker of identity and self-esteem (Chin 2018, p. 337). Throughout this work, I apply Chin's understanding of fan capital to the car boot sale and suggest retaining and presenting knowledge about certain items within the space, chatting to circuit regulars, and partaking in acts of consumption provide attendees with the opportunity to ascend the social hierarchy of the site and prove one's worth and fandom.

I am aware that not all who attend car boot sales would define themselves as fans. Nonetheless, I seek to recognise the importance of these groups as they often attribute value to the same actions and structures as the most dedicated fans. In line with Hills' requests for scholars to acknowledge the contributions of those who do not 'self-identify', I am not concerned with self-proclamation, but more the old adage that actions speak louder than words. Therefore, anyone attending a car boot and partaking in acts of browsing, buying or selling is defined as a fan within the remit of this work. While some 'booters' may gain greater pleasure from their attendance or undertake more fannish activities, there is no doubt that any level of engagement with the site requires a specific skill set and knowledge base that is not part of, nor particularly desirable in, 'official' culture. In recognising this, I offer a counter-argument to the suggestion that the space is in some way uncouth or simplistic, showing it to instead be a space rich with specialised expertise and learning requirements. The 'booter' must have a combination of physical and mental skills in order to successfully

navigate the site and its myriad of unwritten rules, or what Gregson and Crewe (2003, p. 56) refer to as "practical accumulated knowledge". A buyer must know about the objects they are looking to buy, including their provenance, current value, and rarity, and they must be able to spot and find these items of value in the piles of other 'stuff'. They must understand the customs of the sale, such as its individual tariff and the type of prices usually paid, or the best times to make an offer versus when to appeal to the seller's ego (a simple 'you really do have some lovely stuff here', could result in lower prices or lay the foundation for future companionship). Equally, sellers must have a broad comprehension of a range of goods in order to ensure they are appropriately marketing their stock. Any one seller could deal in vinyl records, furniture, children's toys and clothing, and consequently must have at least some proficiency in each category.

Of course, spending power is central to 'successful' booting, yet knowledge is perhaps the principal currency available for trade within the space, as even unsuccessful exchanges can enhance a person's capital. As Sherry Jr. (1990, p. 26) points out, failed trades commonly result in informal lectures from the seller, or even from eavesdropping buyers, and thus offer details that can then be carried to the next transaction. Therefore, a 'booter's' capital is in a constant state of flux. It is accumulated, tested, lost, sharpened and refined through both successful and unsuccessful interchanges, moments of listening and observing, and acts of shifting and sorting. Each conversation is an opportunity to learn or relearn the value of an item, its potential collectability, or its history. This information makes the buyer or seller 'better' (i.e. they buy/sell more items, or they can share their knowledge with other 'booters'), and therefore raises their status within the community. Indeed, this symbolic value can ultimately outweigh any profit or bargain, as it feeds into the self-worth and identity of the individual attendee.

Fan cultural capital also plays a role in selecting the type of sale to attend. Although each individual event potentially offers new items, new arrangements, and new experiences—an aspect that Stone, Horne and Hibbert (1996, p. 7) relate to gambling, and the thrill of slot machines—patterns do arise, and experienced 'booters' know which events offer the best 'hunting grounds'. Even as the car boot sale offers a stock set of pleasures that make up what Petrescu and Bhatli (2013, p. 58) call its "social character", they are ultimately shaped by several factors: geographical location, reputation, and ownership. In extending the fandom thread that runs through this article, car boot sales can be seen in a similar way to the liminal space of the fan convention. As Zubernis and Larsen (2018, p. 214) note, "conventions can be considered paratexts, which change expectations about or redefine the meaning of the primary text upon which they are based". In this analogy, different car boots—and their different locations, sizes, clientele, times, surfaces, and fees—change the

meaning of the primary consumption experience. In order to explore this in more detail, I will discuss my findings from two long running sites, one in West Sussex and the other in Hampshire. In doing so, I am able to outline the complexities of car booting, illustrate the different types of satisfaction that can be garnered from the experience, and show the extent to which the activity is based on the accumulation and exchange of cultural capital.

Ford Airfield Market and Car Boot, a year-round event held on Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday mornings, has been running for over 30 years in its West Sussex location. It is a busy and popular sale, and has a good reputation for high quality items, particularly on a Thursday, which draws out only the most committed 'booters'. As it is a more difficult day to attend, the weekday event attracts those who base a portion of their livelihoods on the car boot sale, and overheard conversations from either side of the stall suggest the Thursday event is the place to either make money or find the best items. For example, it is not unusual to hear sellers at the Saturday or Sunday sale lambasting the lower quality of the clientele in comparison to the weekday slot, with the most common complaints revolving around the buyers being 'cheap' and 'wanting something for nothing'. Attendance during the week therefore proves and supplements one's cultural capital, whilst the heightened level of commitment extends attendees membership to a more elite group. In an act of communal—yet seemingly silent—agreement, Thursday's event anticipates the increased dedication of the potential consumer by prioritising quality over quantity. Unlike the majority of car boots, a Thursday morning in Ford sees fewer items offered and higher prices paid. The tables are sparser, with sellers tendering only a few high quality, high-ticket items, or specialising in certain goods—just jewellery and watches, or ephemera, or lamps. As Duffy (2013, p. 351) and Hewer note, "the setting up one's table to best display stock is itself an art of practising, an exercise in staging and performance through objects". On Thursday in Ford, the performance is one that moves the boot sale away from its lowbrow roots and closer to the more highbrow space of the antique fair, as carefully manicured tables see pre-sorted stock posed for the committed 'booters'.

In contrast, Sunday's sale at Bridgemary School, set within a busy suburb of Gosport, Hampshire, is more convenient and accessible to a general audience than its weekday counterpart. As a result, we see a lower percentage of professional vendors and more 'civilian' attendees. At Bridgemary, products become 'liquid assets', as the sale actively increases demand for new goods by making older items easier to sell and replace (Fox, in Thomas 2003, p. 66). It is a place for thrifty shoppers, those who seek to save money so as to engage in acts of future consumption (Evans 2011, p. 552). Most of the items for sale consist of used clothes, baby toys, outdated appliances and household decor, and the event provides an important community service to those who wish to sustainably dispose of

objects. As Bohlin (2019, p. 7) outlines in her detailed work on Swedish second-hand markets, there is an innate sense of 'goodness' that comes with keeping objects in circulation. Due to the 'down-to-earth' nature of Bridgemary, this sense of 'goodness' is able to circulate more freely than those sales wherein the demands for high-ticket items are greater. The resulting sale places emphasis on the seller's need to dispose of unwanted goods and the buyer's ability to root out bargains.

The patterns exposed by these examples show that 'booters' who retain the required capital can target certain events and avoid others. In the cases outlined here, it would seem that the sale at Ford may be a more tempting prospect for a serious fan. The pre-sale preparation undertaken by the sellers provides a quasi-guarantee that more quality items will be offered, whilst regular attendance could lead to a level of familiarity and acceptance from community leaders. However, Bridgemary's randomness can prove to be an attractive prospect. Although you may have to look harder—and risk coming away empty-handed—the thrill of acquisition is intensified due to the difficulty of the 'hunt'. Sherry, Jr., Belk and Wallendorf (1988, p. 458) compare second-hand treasure hunting to a type of ancient game, whilst Pearce (1995, p. 184) goes further, stating that questing for goods within these second-hand consumption sites becomes a sport for the participants. Danet and Katriel (1994, p. 223) put this sense of play and contest down to the interplay between skill and chance, meaning that finding items in a lesser-regarded space can vindicate one's own expertise as a 'booter'. Due to the blunting of this skill in an era of ever smarter digital algorithms, unearthing worthwhile objects in a sea of other 'stuff' within a physical space allows the buyer to flaunt their prowess as an expert spotter whilst claiming the identity of a maverick traditionalist. It also offers the finder more fan capital, as stories of excitation and exhumation, of stalking and chasing, can be shared with fellow enthusiasts so as to prove one's 'talent'. It is therefore common to hear these tales being regaled as you move through the site, and even if the experience is not verbally retold, it can be privately replayed to enhance the emotional bonds one feels towards the object and the act of 'booting' in general.

'HONESTLY, YOU WON'T FIND ANOTHER ONE HERE TODAY, I PROMISE YOU': COLLECTING

Acts of collecting are dependent upon varying levels of fan cultural capital, skill and know-how. Indeed, there are elements of luck and chance involved, yet a buyer must have a certain adeptness in order to find an item and finalise a purchase. Each exchange and negotiation places reputations on the line, as a "collector is defined by what he or she collects, and the collector is shamed when his or her purchases are not respected or valued by others" (Jenkins

2017, p. 232). At the car boot sale, these risks occur prior to the point of purchase, as the very act of asking the price of an item exposes one's taste to the seller. From finding an object and flagging down the seller, buyers are suddenly thrust into the world of negotiations. Here, the concept of risk merges with that of skill, as attendees' mastery of haggling and bartering are tested against each other. As deals are closed, buyers are conscious of not wanting to be labelled as 'cheap'—a damning brand in the car boot community—yet overspending can be just as damaging, as paying over the odds can reveal a lack of cultural capital. Thus, in these richly layered affairs, far more is at stake than the object, as attendees have a chance to test their skill, define their reputation and cement their position within the community.

The car boot sale is predicted on acts of physicality and touch. Attendees must attend and be present within the space, and once there, they may be required to move, bend, sort, pick up and examine. Focus is on the use of eyes and hands, first to scan and spot, and then to grab and feel. 'Booters' might need to lift up an item to find the maker's name, squint to make out its hallmark, or lick a finger and rub off some grime to see if it will 'clean up'. Buyers shake, rattle and squeeze objects; they measure, sit, wobble or listen for a phantom tick; and assess the object's patina, which at the car boot sale serves as visual proof of longevity and authenticity (McCracken 1998). Although these types of activities may feel outmoded in a digital age wherein we are growing ever more distant from the things we buy, such sensual experiences do in fact remain relatively stable, even outside of the realm of second-hand consumption. As Moist and Banash (2013, p. 8) note, "the status of objects may be changing, but people's meaningful attachments to them have only become stronger". At the car boot sale, the object reigns supreme; it is not hidden away in stock rooms or ordered in from distant warehouses. Quite the opposite in fact, as the object's presence is the only marker that there is a retailscape at all. Once the unsold items are packed up and driven away, the space returns to its previous, pre-sale status.

The collective presence of the physical item represents a temporary yet communal archive of objects. Regardless of whether it is disorganised or refined, the act of presenting a series of 'things' creates a transient collection that can stir a range of emotions in the seasoned veteran. As the scope of objects that can be encountered within the space is vast, and often unpredictable, it is common for attendees to feel a sense of excitement as they wander up the first aisle. As Mark Paterson (2018, p. 196) notes, the experience of shopping is one of imagination, fantasy and desire, emotions that are enhanced due to the randomness of the boot fair. The imagination runs wild due to the sale's unpredictability, and the journey to the site often involves moments of daydreaming and wishing. When there, emotions change as people move through the retail space and become familiar with the items on sale.

Enthusiasm can give way to elation if a bargain is found, or perhaps disappointment if nothing is seen. This is reminiscent of the findings uncovered by Ayres (2019, p. 145), wherein she defines the act of Goodwill bin shopping as a low risk addictive gamble which many feel they could never 'quit' out of a fear that may might miss out on future treasures. 'Booters' have a similar attachment to the site, and the fear of missing out is a clear reason for the presence of certain individuals. It is not rare to hear complaints about the lack of good things 'these days', suggesting attendance is as much about reassurance as it is about pleasure.

As stated by Ferraro, Sands and Brace-Govan (2016, p. 263), the very decision to visit second-hand consumption sites is an act of expression that enables the performance of one's socially conscious self. However, attendance is only the first step of many, as each object at the sale has the potential to do a type of 'social work' (Woodward 2007, p. 4). The car boot sale is a stage for performance and a chance to express oneself through material culture. Although collections are often classified in the home—where McCracken (2005, p. 440) notes they shed their commercially assigned meanings in favour of the owner's preferences—the car boot makes the usually private public, forcing inhabitants to move through the space with their newly acquired items. 'Booters' are able to judge the taste of their fellow enthusiasts by peering into bags or trolleys, and attendees will often stop others and ask 'how much did you pay for that?' or exclaim 'not bad, can't go wrong with that!'. These interactions, which are instantaneous within the parameters of the space, increase the potential capital of all involved through acts of reassurance and reaction. As Gabriel (2013, p. 46) notes, the objects one decides to buy are manifestations of one's authentic self. Therefore, I suggest here—in line with many discourses on fandom—that the car boot is not just about buying but rather establishing and maintaining an identity through acts of consumption and judgement.

Belk (2001, p. 55) affirms that "collectors create, combine, classify, and curate objects they acquire in such a way that a new product, the collection, emerges. In the process they also produce meaning". When considering the car boot sale, this meaning emerges from the relationship between the buyer and the object. Although scholars such as Harvey (2018, p. 6) warn against seeing objects as empty cultural receptacles that only acquire meanings through purchase, stating that they retain their own agency and carry this through into the new environments they enter. I would argue that the car boot sale uniquely compiles a series of objects open to interpretation. Their very presence at the sale suggests their meaning has changed, as perhaps, in the words of Roster (2014, p. 322), they no longer represent current or desired selves. Ultimately, the car boot collects a series of transient objects ready to be reinterpreted by new owners.

Although it may be tempting to suggest that many of the 'things' at the car boot could be seen to have a non-use value (Belk 2001, p. 62), I instead propose that value at the car boot sale operates on a highly subjective basis. This is not to indicate that the site functions completely separately to the peaks and troughs of the mainstream market. Rather, it is more useful to approach objects within the site as retaining differing degrees of sentimental and historical value, which can influence their economic worth in the eyes of both sellers and buyers. As Dunn (2008, p. 6) states when quoting Baudrillard:

> Physical characteristics of commodities are less important than their social and cultural significance . . . In this view, acts of consumption have less to do with the satisfaction of need and want than with the construction of meaning within the social and cultural worlds.

Importantly, these coded meanings can enhance not only the object's economic value, but also its ability to aid self-representation and identity formation. As a result, subjective value operates as the core mechanic within the consumption practises and social activities of the attendees. As prices are agreed, items become imbued with new and often unique yields that may be unfamiliar or peculiar outside of the car boot sale. This ability to define and redefine the worth of objects, often through acts of storytelling (Guoit and Roux 2010, p. 360), gives 'booters' a greater sense of agency than that offered in more traditional retail environments. As objects change hands between former owner and buyer, the purchase gets wrapped in the story of acquisition, which at times is as important – if not more so – than the object itself. These tales add an essential facet to the object's existing biography (Lovatt 2015, p. 16) potentially enriching its worth to the new owner.

For example, my partner and I purchased a number of unused souvenir tea towels from the now defunct Bursledon Car Boot Sale in Hampshire. During the process of finding the ones we wanted (there must have been hundreds in a number of large blue crates), we discussed where the seller had obtained such a large number of tea towels. She informed us that they belonged to her mother, and that the collection started when one had been bought as a wedding gift. From then on, people had continuously given the seller's mother tea towels until she had hundreds, perhaps thousands. As the seller recounted this story, our links to the objects strengthened—we wanted them more due to the meaning they held to a woman we had never, and will never, meet. This value is almost impossible to measure beyond the memory my partner and I retain. It would not be clear to others who encounter the tea towels—as there is no evidence of the married couple on the towels themselves—and even if there was, there is no guarantee others would find the story so attractive or worthwhile as we did. In this sense, the value we ascribed the story, which consequently shapes our experience of the item, is wholly subjective.

In Derridean terms (1976) it was the trace that we wanted to consume, rather than the tea towel itself. The absence of the origin – in this case the personal significance of the tea towels to the original owner – grafted to the object in such a way that it had the ability to change the towels' meaning and increase its worth. As Pearce (1994, p. 26) states:

> The meaning of the object lies not wholly in the piece itself, nor wholly in its realisation, but somewhere between the two. The object only takes on life or significance when the viewer carries out his realisation, and this is dependent partly upon his disposition and experience, and partly upon the content of the object which works upon him. It is this interplay which creates meaning.

In the example given here, the interplay, the moment of realisation between us and the object, was strongly informed by the seller's storytelling. The previous meaning, the trace of personal significance, history, memory and nostalgia, informed our handling and understanding of the items, enriching our experience to the point that it far exceeded the mundane nature of the object's own content. In line with Bohlin's work, the storytelling of the seller furnished the object with a 'soul', which in turn demanded a heightened level of care and intimacy from us as the new owners (Bohlin 2019, p. 1-2). Although Benjamin's lyrical description of collecting related to his vast library of books, his suggestion that "for a true collector the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopaedia" (1992, p. 60) is true for not only my tea towels, but the majority of purchases made by the car boot sale fan. The anecdotes told through the buying process create a fantastical narrative which is in turn bonded to the object, lavishing it in a quality that often far exceeds its social, cultural and economic worth.

'TRUST ME, THAT'S GOOD MONEY FOR THAT': COMMUNITY

I started this article by discussing the car boot sale's cultural positioning and suggested that it is widely viewed as a plebeian endeavour. I have since used fan theory and ethnography to argue against this stance, showing it to be a nuanced retail environment that affords attendees opportunities to perform acts unavailable in other spaces of commerce. Nevertheless, the combination of cheap things in cheap places has come to classify those who attend in similar terms. This widely believed but rarely justified assessment of the clientele problematically judges a hugely diverse community along the lines of wealth and social status. Of course, it would be overly romantic to suggest that all the sellers are well-meaning and their goods are appropriately sourced (something raised in the work of Stone, Horne, and Hibbert 1996, p. 5), yet in the most part, car boot sales are important social spaces for a range of people—from young parents and elderly enthusiasts to antique dealers

and house clearers.

The car boot sale community is a tightly knit yet accessible social group which offers care, support and companionship to its members. Like all fandoms, there are problematic aspects, such as the ways it replicates the haves-and-have-nots of the wider cultural sector by placing its members in direct competition with each other. Yet, it also welcomes those ostracised from mainstream acts of consumption whilst allowing others to forego unethical or morally questionable acts of commerce. The latter concern is increasingly prevalent in the literature surrounding second-hand consumption, wherein findings show that buyers enjoy framing themselves as ethically conscious recyclers (Bohlin 2019, p. 1). Even as the car boot sale operates as a pleasant hobby for some and a necessity for others, people attending for different reasons can garner the same pleasures from the site. Although certain barriers do prevent people from going to the sales (for example, the locations can be hard to travel to or the surfaces could be potentially hazardous for those in wheelchairs or mobility scooters), the access threshold is remarkably low. There is little monetary outlay beyond travel costs and buying goods, and although there is financial competition within the site itself, attendees can simply enjoy the social aspects of the pursuit with very little expenditure. As mentioned, the car boot sale is a Luddite event, opening it up to those without computers or internet access. While many sales have Facebook pages to update sellers and buyers, a social media presence is by no means essential as news spreads via word of mouth or sales become habitual cornerstones in local communities. Finally, many of the exchanges that occur within the site are based on the globally practised act of bartering. If needed, trades can occur via rudimentary sign language, with fingers representing values and hand gestures replacing welcomes or conversation. Essentially, everyone can speak 'car boot'.

At the boot fair—more so than the shopping centre or high street—economic and recreational motivations are interwoven, producing high levels of consumer sovereignty (Guiot and Roux 2010, p. 356-59). In doing so, the event is a vital part of the wider subcultures that have manifested around hand-me-downs, household reuse and second-hand shops (Lucas 2002, p. 13). The combination of socialisation and consumption in second-hand retail spaces is a longstanding tradition, with Le Zotte (2017, p. 114) showing that the reactional aspects of the garage sale were noted in the media as early as the 1960s. Attendees at the car boot are no different, as they create thriving micro-neighbourhoods and congregate in subcommunities wherein they can catch up and chat. Although these conversations, as noted earlier, can be important for displaying and gaining fan cultural capital, they are also simply social interactions that strengthen interpersonal and group relations. Like Parsons' (2002, p. 590) work on charity shops, which reveals the important social function those second-hand environments play for customers who simply visit the

shops for social reasons, the car boot sale offers a meeting place for people to come together.

Watson's (2009) work on a similarly neglected and unglamorous British institution—the street market—is especially useful in understanding the car boot sale. Her concept of "rubbing along" can easily be transposed to describe socialisation at the car boot. Watson (2009, p. 1581) positions "rubbing along… as a form of limited encounter between social subjects where a glance or gaze, seeing and being seen, sharing embodied spaces, in talk or silence, has the potential to militate against the withdrawal into the self or private realm". As the aftershocks of the pandemic continue to define community interactions, defending against social withdrawal is central to understanding not only the importance of the space, but the manner in which it functions as a fandom. Shared glances can be vital to those who potentially feel excluded in other retail environments, while being seen within the space allows for a non-invasive form of 'checking in'. Watson's (2009, p. 1583) research goes on to reveal "a variety of inclusive behaviours and 'care work' was performed daily by traders in the markets studied". I do not want to conflate the market with the car boot (although the Sunday sale at Ford does include a market, and there is clear crossover in terms of clientele, modes of address, types of items and rules of engagement), yet I can attest to seeing this type of 'care work' occurring first hand. Elderly buyers are offered chairs and coffees by their favourite sellers, conversations revolve around issues of health and wellbeing as much as they do purchases, and nods and 'hellos' between attendees provide vital glimmers of contact to potentially marginal social groups/individuals.

It is worth continuing to discuss elderly attendees due to their regular presence as both sellers and buyers. Even as fan scholarship has mainly given attention to adolescents—what Van den Bulck and Van Gorp (2011, p. 213) refer to as the 'hip' subcultures of Thornton's work or Jenkins' teenage 'geeks'—Harrington (2018, p. 233) notes that there has been some growth in the study of ageing and elderly fans. Although she highlights how scholarly bias towards productive fans discounts the activities of many elderly fans (Harrington 2018, p. 236), I argue here that elderly 'booters' are in fact some of the most 'productive' within the car boot space. More so than many attendees, the actions of elderly car 'booters' are strictly patterned and ritualised. They arrive at similar times every week, set out their stalls in the same way, and inhabit the same pitches. They show important evidence of preparedness – the same flasks are filled with hot beverages, bags and bubble wrap are always close at hand, and change is carefully sorted in bum bags or Tupperware boxes. Elderly patrons also spend the most time on site, as their walking pace is slow and measured, objects are inspected with care, and conversations are long and enriching. Indeed, the rhythmic and predictable activity of the elderly 'booters' is vital to the preservation of the car boot sale. Their forms of

production, be that selling, buying, or simply inhabiting the space, provide an established basis upon which the rest of the community can build.

'SUCH A POPULAR COMMUNITY EVENT': CONCLUSION

This work has shown that, like so many fan communities, the car boot sale becomes a support structure, a shadow community that exists within wider social arrangements while providing key opportunities that those larger frameworks cannot. In the final stages of this work, it is worth considering the impact closures can have on these communities to further illuminate the role they play in providing a sense of belonging and togetherness in an age wherein those feelings continue to be threatened. While the presence of the internet seemingly jeopardises the Luddite pleasures of the sale, I would argue that online shopping actually encourages people to attend events as they hope to find stock for their web stores and eBay listings. The elevated prices paid online drive people to seek out these items at source, and thus analogue and digital shopping habits share a mutually beneficial relationship. Similarly, even as the COVID-19 pandemic forced temporary closures and proved a difficult time for many 'booters', the majority of sales have been able to reopen, albeit with social distancing measures in place. If anything, the time away has only strengthened people's ties to the practice and the quasi-rebellion it provides. Instead, the biggest threat to the event is the inflated value housing developers have placed onto plots of unused land. In the space of four years, two popular sales in Hampshire have been forced to close so as to make way for new housing developments. The first to go was the Bursledon Car Boot Sale, near Southampton, Hampshire. Having run for 32 years, the sale was one of the most established in the UK, and also one of the largest. I attended the penultimate sale and saw the devastation caused by closures first hand. The usually packed field was a scattered with only a handful of sellers and buyers. Whilst we can look at this as a sign that there is little loyalty in 'booting' – the regulars had already moved on before the event had been closed down – it is equally an indication of how fragile these communities are. Decades long habits were broken in an instant by the closing of the event, social circles shattered, and income streams lost.

In another instance, 40 Acres Car Boot Sale in Bedhampton, Hampshire, announced its closure via Facebook on 21/1/20. As with Bursledon, the land was sold to developers, and will now be the source of around 320 new homes. The social media post received a number of comments from attendees, many of which spoke of the event's personal significance and worth to the local community. The sale was described as 'a great weekly event' and 'the best car boot', with many commentators asking whether a new location could be found. The posts were laced with a sense of loss and nostalgia, as the innocence and frivolity of the car boot

was positioned in stark contrast to the apparent 'greed' of the landowner and the chaos a new development may bring to local infrastructure (interestingly, a complaint often levelled towards boot fairs themselves). Ultimately, the car boot was heralded as a space for coming together and a symbol of simpler times by its attendees, and its loss produced genuine concern and sadness within the community it served.

Regardless, the car boot sale remains a thriving yet threatened event, both peripheral and highly visible, a space in which fans can carry out their fandom, and a fandom in its own right. In light of rapid social and cultural change, the car boot sale's allure remains constant. Whilst online shopping offers a more convenient and potentially accessible second-hand consumption experience, it limits the opportunities for community connection, risk taking and capital exchange that are so central to the pleasures of second-hand shopping. Equally, as COVID-19 threatened to stigmatise the large gatherings that define the boot sale's social character, crowds of 'booters' were quick to return to the space. Although there were grumbles about queues, the swift resumption of the practice shows significant commitment from the fan community as so much of what defines the experience runs contrary to post-COVID guidelines. As described throughout the work, the car boot is a place of close quarters interaction; of tactile experiences; of large groups from varied locales exchanging objects that have been in contact with others. Nonetheless, even as these actions pose serious risks, people quickly recommenced their usage of the space, and numbers are steadily growing.

By explicitly aligning fan theory with the study of the car boot sale, this article has delivered a detailed examination of the space and its attendees while alluding to the ways in which other forms of second-hand consumption could be discussed as a part of the fan studies discourse. The activities I have outlined here, such as knowledge exchange, treasure seeking and community engagement, mirror that of other forms of second-hand shopping, such as charity shopping or attending auction houses. A similar approach, which employs fan studies to discuss the manner in which second-hand consumption aids the performance of an idealised self, would be a fruitful avenue of further research while responding to recent calls for diversity in the fan studies area. Ultimately, its deployment here has allowed me to suggest that while the car boot may be disorganised, messy, dirty – perhaps even a little 'dodgy' or outdated to some – to many others it provides an important social and cultural foothold, a space of empowerment, expression and representation, and one much valued by its devoted fans.

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