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CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF A FLEA MARKET SPACE

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, Communication

By

Tyler D. Curran

May 2022

CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF A FLEA MARKET SPACE

Communication

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Master of Arts

Tyler D. Curran

ABSTRACT

The ubiquitous presence of flea markets is emblematic of midwestern life. They illustrate common consumption practices and distinct modes of entertainment. This study investigates how vendors within a large, midwestern flea market conceptualize and utilize the space. Additionally, this study reveals the relationship between variant conceptualizations of the market and the merchandise sold by individual vendors. Existing research identifies a tension between social and economic dimensions within flea markets. This study extends prior research by examining the specific social fulfillments vendors garner and identifying other non-economic rationalizations for participation within the market. The results are derived from ethnographic observations and supplemental semi-structured interviews with vendors. Each interview is analyzed according to thematic analysis, supported by contextual field notes. The subsequent analysis explores the diverse non-profit incentives that motivate vendors to continue their work. From the data, five themes emerged that explain variant conceptualizations of the market: (1) Life After Labor, (2) The Primacy of People, (3) Personal Investment in Merchandise, (4) Hoarding, (5) Identity Maintenance. In sum, this study is an exploration of how vendors understand and function within the quasi-economic spaces they participate in.

KEYWORDS: flea markets, third place theory, kitsch, taste, carnivalesque, identity, hoarding

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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INTRODUCTION

It is rare to drive through a town in the Midwest without passing several flea markets. They are pervasive to the extent that they become an expected part of the scenery. In some small towns, they function as the only public indoor space, excluding restaurants, where one can spend leisure time. Indeed, flea markets can provide a sense of entertainment in areas with very little otherwise and may also incentivize social interactions. Additionally, the products themselves are representative of larger cultural trends. Certain items can be viewed as once-popular icons or cherished products of the past. A glimpse inside almost any flea market provides a snapshot of recent American history, or rather an instant timelapse. The merchandise sold within flea markets, and the nature of the transactions that occur, illustrate which items of excess retain value and how said values are formed and articulated (Maisel, 1974). Moreover, sellers speculate what types of goods deserve to be sold (LaLone et al., 1993), and consumers determine which objects they want in their lives. Thus, flea markets foster a space of cultural exchange and value negotiation. Indeed, flea markets are rich sites of culture that merit investigation. Yet, the vendors operating the individual booths contribute to the environment more than the products they sell.

Although vendors are usually not present at contemporary flea markets, the flea market central to this analysis is marked by the presence of the vendors. The flea market in question is a large, midwestern flea market (MFM) in a town with a population of approximately fifty thousand. MFM could be characterized as a ‘periodic market’ (Sherry, 1990b). In this case, this means it is exclusively open Saturday and Sunday, during normal business hours. This temporal attribute shapes the experience in three ways: (1) it creates a sense of urgency; (2) it allows the

vendors to work their own booths; and (3) it funnels a large population of the town into the same building at the same time. Although this setting is somewhat traditional for flea markets, it is not necessarily contemporary. Other flea markets in the area are either owned and operated by a single owner, or they contain unmanned booths operated by remote vendors.

At MFM, the presence of vendors amplifies a sense of small-market nostalgia and increases the participatory experience for vendors and customers alike. Due to the proximity of the vendors, bargaining can not only occur but can also take on the spirit of play (LaLone et al., 1993; Maisel, 1974). Although sociocultural factors, such as individuals' comfort level with bargaining or even conversing, may limit the enactment of playful bargaining (Maisel, 1974), the lack of defined rules on the matter allows vendors to engage in a prop-based social interaction typically absent from modern transactions. Even outside of bargaining, the products within flea market booths often spur unlikely conversations, where they serve as props to facilitate dialogue. The immediacy between vendor, customer, and object promotes a sense of authenticity and appreciation otherwise diminished in contemporary consumer culture (LaLone et al., 1993; Sherry, 1990a). Consequentially, MFM, due to its genre of business, generates unique potential to be a space for gathering, conversing, and co-creating a fulfilling style of commerce. This mutual potentiality for intimacy—usually superseded by mere economic transactions—may prove MFM to be an unrealized exemplar capable of redefining the social limits of commodity exchange.

However, this unfettered, implicit potential lies in the hands of the vendors that compose the market. Although the structure of MFM predates each vendor's involvement, their presence overrides real-time relations. Sellers occupy booths primarily to peddle goods, but they also form a social fabric that customers must navigate. Their collective perceptions, dispositions,

sensibilities, and actions determine the material and affective quality of the space. To clarify, the vendors' ideal conception of the market and its function is embodied in praxis that shapes the commercial and experiential attributes of the space. For this reason, the primary aim of this study is to understand *how participants (vendors) conceptualize MFM as a space*. Additionally, this study hopes to reveal *the relationship between how vendors conceptualize the space and the merchandise they sell?*

To do this work, I must first demonstrate relevant conclusions and approaches of other scholarship concerning flea markets, as well as speculate what conceptual schemes might prove to be fruitful in the analysis. To begin, I discuss research relevant to conceptualizations of flea market spaces. Then, I examine potential relationships between products, taste, and class. The goal of these sections is to establish theoretical groundwork to understand how conceptualizations of MFM, as well as idealizations of the larger economy, are articulated through vendors' distinctive decisions that influence the niche products they sell. Specifically, understanding how items are intentionally curated might reveal deeper insights about contrasting conceptions of MFM as a space.

Following the review of background literature previewed here, I detail the procedures I enacted to collect and analyze the data necessary for this study. Subsequently, I introduce five themes derived from the resulting data that elucidate how vendors conceptualize the space and how that conceptualization informs their selection of products. Ensuing the analysis of the data, I discuss the relationship between the research questions and the provided themes, implications of the results, directions for future research, and limitations of this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Flea markets have drawn the attention of several scholars across multiple disciplines as a result of their unique ability to blur the lines between social and economic realms (e.g., LaLone et al., 1993; Maisel, 1974; Sherry, 1990a, 1990b). However, much of academia's interest in flea markets is situated within market and consumer research (e.g., Arnould & Thompson, 2005; LaLone et al., 1993; Maisel, 1974; Petrescu & Bhatli, 2013; Sherry, 1990a, 1990b). Although it is intuitive that flea markets are primarily studied by market researchers, the disproportion of consumer research signals a lack of complementary research from communication perspectives. In some sense, consumer researchers do study communicative phenomena, albeit with an economic end in mind. However, there is a need to study flea market experiences as ends-in-themselves. The study proposed here aims to address this gap. The following will address the potentialities of the flea market as a space. The first section details potential conceptions of a flea market space. The subsequent section considers the role objects subsume in participants' understandings of MFM as a space.

The Flea Market as a Space

This section inspects past scholarship relating to flea market spaces and introduces potential modes of viewing that might aid an understanding of how MFM is conceptualized by vendors. I introduce Sherry's (1990a, 1990b) foundational qualitative work on midwestern flea markets and the dialectics he developed to ground his analysis. This review signals a tension between the social and economic functions of the market. Then, I explicate pertinent aspects of Bakhtin's (1984a, 1984b, 2008) theory of carnivalesque to display to preface potential features

of the social realm of MFM. Next, I discuss Oldenburg and Brissett's (1982) third place theory, and how MFM might challenge the distinct spatial categories that Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) propose.

Economic and Festive Dimensions. An apparent contradiction or tension lies at the heart of MFM's potential. There is equal opportunity for the space to be conceptualized as an economic or social utility. Sherry (1990a, 1990b) identified these potentialities as either economic or festive. The value and relevance of Sherry's work partly stem from his qualitative approach. Sherry (1990a) implemented an ethnographic method by immersing himself in a specific flea market monthly for two and a half years. There, he conducted participant observations, as well as directive and non-directive interviewing. (Sherry, 1990a). Sherry's (1990a) work is especially relevant here due to his interest in the competing structures and functions of the space and its members. He developed an axis based on two dialects: the structural dialectic of formal-informal and the functional dialectic of economic-festive (Sherry, 1990a). "Formal structure is characterized as official, controlled, highly rationalized, proactive, and institutional" (Sherry, 1990a, p. 16). The category of 'informal structure' is simply the antithesis of the 'formal structure.' Similarly, a primarily 'economic function' prioritizes rationality and utility, in contrast to 'festive functions' that privilege experience and pleasure (Sherry, 1990a). Interestingly, Sherry (1990a) explored the tensions within these dialectics and posited that flea markets embody virtues of both ends, displaying "dialectical simultaneity" (p. 16).

Sherry's (1990a) research, although dated, contributes some key insights. First, Sherry (1990a) described how flea markets function as 'polylogues,' meaning they promote multiple readings/voices, particularly about the nature of the contemporary U.S. marketplace. Visitors are

equally invited to understand the flea market as a rational market, similar to an urban mall, or a “fantastic economy” (Sherry, 1990a, p. 27). Yet, the festive demeanor of the market allows the negotiation of exchange value, the aestheticization of use-value, and the sacralization of commodities (Sherry, 1990a).

Flea markets also hold the potential to provoke an awareness of contemporary market dynamics. The deviance of a flea market creates an apparent gap between that experience and participating in typical commerce, despite being a form of consumerism. Still, flea markets invite a certain re-envisioning that Sherry (1990a) sums up well: “The flea market virtually demands that its participants question the nature of marketing and consumption in contemporary life” (p. 28). The multiplicity of readings may be ignored by some, and their questioning may stop short at recognizing the flea market as a “parallel ‘guerilla’ economy that merely mirrors the formal sector...” (Sherry, 1990a, p. 28). In short, a variant reading of flea markets is not guaranteed to every participant, and some may only recognize the deviance of the market as a poor imitation of contemporary shopping centers. However, for others, the flea market may be experienced as an immersive, holistic, and alternative economy (Sherry, 1990a). The nature of the flea market validates both positions. Sherry (1990a) claims the flea market decenters and recontextualizes the consumer experience by re-merging the social with the economic and allowing disorder to take place within its liminal confines. This notion of the flea market as a polylogue and liminal space will echo throughout the later discussion of ‘third places.’

The second key takeaway from Sherry’s work is similarly paradoxical. Sherry (1990a) emphasized that flea markets reproduce capitalism while recontextualizing the market experience in the context of the social. In this sense, relations between consumers, producers, distributors, and products are uprooted from their disembodied forms within late capitalism, and the human

element of transaction is restored through the primacy of proximity and immediacy. Sherry (1990a) even claimed flea markets somehow have the capacity to instruct individuals on how to surpass commodity fetishism. This transcendence can only be achieved through an interrogation of how social relations produce commodities. The immediacy of the flea market restores transparency between at least a fragment of these social relations.

It is of apparent interest that a space can both reaffirm capitalist norms while subverting the same categories of expectations. This contradiction is partially displayed by the temporary transcendence of weekday proletariats into part-time capitalists (Sherry, 1990a). Likewise, the overt exercise for flea market participants is to buy, sell, and trade goods based on an item's inherent worth. Yet, the flea market shifts the loci of an object's value away from its 'inherent' worth by recognizing its position within social relations. Flea markets also provide a space where consumption may take a backseat to casual encounters (with both people and artifacts). In this context, window shopping may not be an envious outing, but instead an authentic experience (Sherry, 1990a)—an end in itself.

A flea market's position within Sherry's (1990a) axis of dialectics is not static. It is entirely variable, market-to-market, across time. I remind myself here that qualitative knowledge is always "partial, temporary, and contested" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017, p. 193), meaning qualitative work is valuable because it is particular, not generalizable. No study could ever definitively encompass and explain an entire location or phenomenon. Further, the need for the proposed study is driven by conditions that seem to be exponentially intensifying. Mass production has only expanded since Sherry's (1990a) work, forever fueling the food chain of lateral cycling that flea markets rely on. Likewise, we have only become further alienated from the goods we produce and consume. The goods that fill our lives are purchased individually but

arrive divorced from the contexts of their production. For instance, we are unaware of the many hands that produce and deliver any item bought from Amazon.com. This ongoing shift in the cultural/consumer landscape is made evident by the fact that MFM is one of the few periodic markets in the area where vendors still attend their booths. Ultimately, just as Sherry (1990a) concluded, there is a great need to further explore the tensions between economic and festive functions within the context of American flea markets.

Carnavalesque Potential. The expressive and festive dimensions of flea markets share a similarity with Bakhtin's (1984a, 1984b) description of the carnival. The concept of carnival refers to a ritual and celebration of life, wherein the social order is temporarily suspended (Bakhtin, 1984a). Although the concept of carnivalesque is typically utilized within literary criticism, it could serve a vital role in understanding the festive elements of flea markets. Bakhtin (2008) noted that within the carnival, there is no distinction between performer and attendee. Simply, they all share the same lived experience (Bakhtin, 2008).

Bakhtin (1984a) promoted a "carnivalistic sense of the world" (p. 123) driven by four core attributes. First, free and familiar interaction between people is necessary. Simply, both explicit and implicit class distinctions, hierarchies, and cliques are rendered non-existent. Next, eccentric behavior is legitimized, where otherwise it would be considered taboo or distasteful. Additionally, carnivalistic misalliances occur, meaning traditional categories of sacred/profane, new/old, high/low culture are dissolved, allowing binary ends to meet. Finally, there must be a presence of the sacrilegious. Here, Bakhtin (1984a) alluded to the occurrence of blasphemy and what might be considered ungodly, like profanity. Altogether, a carnivalistic sense of the world, cultivated in a space (rather than a literary work), must be committed to a suspension of social boundaries and condoned behavior.

Bakhtin's (2008) theory clearly intersects with Sherry's (1990a) analysis of festive dimensions of flea markets. The high level of free expression, the mingling of distinct social categories, and the blurring of normative value judgments all point to the informal and festive side of Sherry's (1990a) dialectic. The dissolution of the sacred/profane, as well as high/low culture, may be especially evident in the items curated and sold at MFM. Finally, it is worth noting the importance of ambivalence in Bakhtin's (2008) scheme. The carnival is a recognition of the dualism of life and death, change and crisis, and wisdom and foolery. Originally in reference to medieval carnivals, Bakhtin (2008) points to a double life led by participants, where the mundane life upheld all normative distinctions, while their existence within the carnival devalued and often inverted these separations. This ambivalence or liminality echoes the tensions between Sherry's (1990a) economic/festive and formal/informal dialectics in flea markets. Carnavalesque theory attempts to understand how desires for freedom and expression within the cultural consciousness are articulated and lived through ritualistic acts in a certain time and place (Bakhtin, 2008). A periodic flea market might allow for such an expression.

Third Place Theory. The focus of this study is to investigate how different vendors envision MFM's ideal structure and function. A flea market may portray varying festive and economic attributes. Likewise, individual vendors might envision their booths contrastingly. Vendors might imagine the market as an entrepreneurial opportunity, a giant social icebreaker that might make a slight profit, or a hobby that allows them to lightly hoard without filling up a storage unit. One way to consider the potentially divergent conceptualizations of MFM is to map them onto Oldenburg and Brissett's (1982) third place theory. According to Oldenburg and Brissett (1982), there are three spaces. The first is the home, the second is the workplace, and the third is a different sphere altogether (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982). The third place is meant to be

highly social and fulfilling in a manner the other two places cannot sustain consistently.

Churches, parks, and community centers act as traditional examples of third places. Additionally, bowling alleys, bars, or arcades might qualify as third places, assuming the social features supersede an economic function.

Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) found the third place to be a primary need of people. They worried that society was losing third places and that people lack genuine social arenas to find fulfillment. Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) claimed the social elements of both work and home life fall second to the responsibilities that both demand. In fact, Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) claimed many of our supposed third places are contaminated with the formal attributes of the second place. Even bars or restaurants maintain a dichotomy of those on the clock and those enjoying free time. They also refuted the myth that third places, like a pub, are simply places to escape from the pressures of daily life. Although they can serve that purpose, they are also likely to host positive and meaningful experiences. Simply put, Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) noticed a decline in places dedicated solely to socialization. Consequently, Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) argued there is a greater need for such places, as they can contribute to a greater sense of community and overall mental health of the said community. Of course, the original declaration for third places was developed in response to the cultural conditions of the time of publication (1982). Since then, virtual spaces have shown potential to take on the role of third places (Wimmer, 2013). Despite this, the incessant commercialization of public space has resulted in a lack of truly social spaces. Likewise, in private businesses, casual socialization, unaccompanied by consistent purchases, can be deemed as loitering. With this in mind, there is still a greater need for places where social participation does not require consumption.

The flea market, although impeded by economic functions, may be imagined as a third

place. One scholar even developed an architectural/landscape strategy designed to enhance a flea market's potential to function as a third place (Nipu, 2021). This aim was achieved by expanding areas dedicated to impromptu social gatherings, creating a flow between indoor and outdoor spaces, and intermixing smaller areas for even more casual markets (Nipu, 2021). Nonetheless, Nipu's (2021) proposal reveals the potential for flea markets to be third places.

Wimmer (2013) summarizes the attributes of a third place well. A third place must do the following: be neutral and entail little obligation; level rank and status; primarily foster conversation; be accessible and accommodable; contain regulars who set the mood; maintain a low profile; generate a playful mood; and serve as a home away from home, generating sincere comfort for some (Wimmer, 2013). Here, there is a parallel between Oldenburg and Brissett's (1982) qualifications for a third place, Bakhtin's (1984a) carnivalistic sense of the world, and Sherry's (1990a) notion of the festive dimension of flea markets. However, one distinction is that Oldenburg and Brissett's (1982) conception of a third place is dependent on the consistency of individuals that maintain a certain atmosphere.

Examining each qualification, it is clear MFM may meet the necessary requirements to function as a third place. MFM requires no obligation from the customers and only voluntary participation from the vendors. Similarly, there is no apparent hierarchy. It is possible some are regarded (or regard themselves) above others, but it is not obvious. Although the primary pursuit of any market is the sale of goods, it is possible that, to some, sales are secondary (in either occurrence or value) to friendly conversation. Maisel (1973) noted that [monetary] exchange within flea markets was often cited as "incidental to social pleasantries" (p. 502). Additionally, MFM is accessible to the public. Still working through the attributes listed previously, MFM, by nature, is filled with regulars who instinctively set the mood. The vendors act as a fixed cast of

characters each day they are open, while the customers are either recurring or extras. Likewise, MFM seems to maintain a low profile, as the stakes for the participants are consistently low. Finally, the former attributes, along with the novelty of the products, likely produce a sense of playfulness. These combined aspects create an atmosphere that could very easily be viewed as a home away from home. However, it could simultaneously be perceived as a workplace away from work.

Due to the arrangement of MFM, some can view it as a third place, while others might see it as purely a second place (of work). Maisel (1974) noticed a theme of entrepreneurship and rags-to-riches stories within the flea markets she studied. In this case, the social function of the market was superseded by the goal of marking up goods to gain capital. Similarly, LaLone et al. (1993) classified vendors by the items they sold and the conduct they displayed. The categories consist of wholesalers, who sought maximum profit; dealers, who were specialists in some form or another; and marketers, who collected and sold whatever they wanted at their leisure (LaLone et al., 1993). Each type of vendor might exhibit different tendencies and visions of the market's purpose. One question of the present study pertains to the tensions that might arise out of contrasting visions between vendors and the liminality that might produce for all participants.

In addition, it is possible that individuals who take their booth(s) more seriously (as a second place) might impact the conditions of the flea market, thus affecting whether/how the market can be utilized as a third place for others. This dichotomy will reveal itself through the types of products each vendor sells, the amount they markup their items, the nature of their advertising, their demeanor/friendliness with others, as well as their responses to interview questions. Specifically, participants' conceptions of the space might become most apparent through an investigation of how vendors understand and relate to the products they collect and

sell. The merchandise of MFM, which largely constitutes the store, has the power to “reconnect people with the traditions and mythic themes they grew up with, or to serve as cultural sense-making beacons for future generations” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017, p. 279). It is, in fact, the novel merchandise that attracts individuals to the market and serves as discussion fodder for consumers and participants alike.

Products, Taste, and Class

An analysis of the products appearing at MFM requires an examination of archetypal flea market products (including their lifespan and use-value). The items one might find at a flea market are undoubtedly distinctive to their setting and representative of their owners. Certain genres of objects are prototypical. Boxes of McDonald’s toys, well-worn tools, and cast porcelain figurines are nearly expected to fill the space. Booths often consist of practical items such as “tapes, tools, clothes,” along with culturally significant items such as toys, “antiques, collectibles, memorabilia, or ‘funk’” (Maisel, 1974, p. 496). The common denominator among these products is their age. Occasionally, new or recently refurbished items appear, but most objects have a lengthy history. Although isolated from their original context, these objects collectively depict snippets of thousands of private lives and represent the commodified experience of whole generations (Shcheglova & Shipulina, 2016). At flea markets, “amidst the leftover material of daily life, we encounter the unsettling evidence that routines have histories” (Moran, 2004, p. 63). In this sense, flea markets are an opportunity to encounter objects with mundane historical significance before they fade into an inevitable irrelevance.

Consequently, items found at MFM are near the end of their lifespan, existing at the latter end of a temporal practice of exchange. A process of lateral cycling occurs, extending “the life of

consumer objects by promoting their circulation beyond their initial end-user” (Sherry, 1990b, p. 195). Items can be bought, then resold, even within the same market. Lateral cycling, which is both a “result and response to commercial obsolescence and economic pressure” (Sherry, 1990b, p. 195), is the defining feature of a flea market. Due to this process, flea markets operate as a lengthy pitstop, or purifying purgatory, between the household and the landfill. As such, flea markets are aggregates of mass production, where excess is either celebrated or neglected. Through this lens, flea markets exist as a graveyard of late capitalism—a cultural limbo where value is pending.

The following establishes conceptual lenses that aid an understanding of the products that vendors buy, craft, and sell. This work entails a summary of kitsch and an overview of rubbish value creation (Parsons, 2007). These sections illustrate how mass-produced items might take on emergent values and meanings to vendors and customers. Then, I draw upon the work of Bourdieu (1984) and his commentators (Swirski & Vanhanen, 2017; Wright, 2015) to provide a background for a discussion on the relationship between class, taste, and identity.

On Kitsch. A brief analysis of kitsch may benefit our understanding of the products present at MFM, and their dubious cultural value. The mere mentioning of kitsch produces an appetite for a deeper meditation on the philosophy of aesthetics (Kulka, 1996). Although there is no consensus on the emergence of kitsch, the proliferation of kitsch coincided with mass production, the creation of the middle class, and more generally, the industrial revolution (Kulka, 1996). Regardless, kitsch is now pervasive and flea markets are the primary site of its ubiquity.

Much like the definition of art, the essence of kitsch is elusive. One must view kitsch through an anti-essentialist lens (meaning, there is no true definition or quintessential form of kitsch), or conceptualize kitsch as a spectrum, to understand how social actors interact with the

objects (Kulka, 1996). One could propose semi-arbitrary subcategories of kitsch, including Christian-kitsch (Kulka, 1996), beach-kitsch, and Native American-kitsch. If these are difficult to imagine, picture holdable ceramic sculptures of angels praying, dolphins emerging from waves, or Native American toddlers with headdresses.

Regardless, Kulka (1996), in his long-form analyses, decided upon several determinate elements of kitsch. The first is that “Kitsch depicts objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions” (Kulka, 1996, p. 27). By stock emotions, Kulka (1996) means publicly accessible or universally recognized images. Kitsch appeals to the most common denominators of human experience, like the beauty of nature, sacrifice, or freedom. This explication leads directly into Kulka’s (1996) second condition of kitsch: “The objects or themes depicted by kitsch are instantly and effortlessly identifiable” (p. 32). The third condition reveals the paradox that kitsch induces at flea markets. “Kitsch does not substantially enrich our associations relating to the depicted objects or themes” (Kulka, 1996, p. 35). This third condition is challenged by the value-negotiation that likely occurs at MFM. There, vendors might use kitsch as an opportunity to glimpse a mediated history, reflect on sentimental connections, or transform mere mass commodities into creative works of art.

On Rubbish. Kulka’s (1996) claims about the defining features of kitsch may be valid. However, kitsch, due to its simplicity, may not enrich our understanding of the content they depict. Yet, individuals have agency in their relationship to these objects. Here, Thompson’s (2017) theory of value creation and destruction in relation to what he terms, *rubbish*, is illuminating. Thompson (2017) introduces three categories that items can be recognized as: transient, durable, and rubbish (Parsons, 2007). Transient objects diminish in value as they persist in time, eventually becoming worthless as their finite lifespan is surpassed (Parsons,

2007). Contrastingly, durable items increase in value throughout time, like fine wine, and they are hoped to last forever. Rubbish, then, is temporally situated between these two categories.

According to Thompson (2017), a transient item declines in value until it becomes rubbish (worthless). An item exists as rubbish until it can be rediscovered and socially constructed to be durable (Parsons, 2007). Often, this value-negotiation occurs at flea markets. Flea markets are a designated space for items to exist as rubbish, and therefore, a space for them to be transmuted into durable items. This is how kitsch is reconceptualized as antique. MFM, and other flea markets, are a place of intermission—where value creation and destruction are primary exercises.

Although some items are resituated as durable, transient, or rubbish due to cultural paradigm shifts or noteworthy events connected to the items, much of this process is speculated to occur at the level of the individual. Singularization, a process noted by anthropologists, deals with exactly this. Sherry (1990b) describes singularization as the determinate moments where objects move “out of the realm of mere commodity and into the realm of psychologically significant—even transcendent—meaning” (p. 196). In these instances, individuals associate a biography with the object and dissociate the item from the homogeneity of its mass production. Here, individuals (vendors) take pride in salvaging or reincarnating goods (Sherry, 1990b).

In short, how vendors conceptualize MFM as a space might be revealed by the relationships they have with the items they collect and sell. The nature of the items, and the potential intimacy they develop with them, influence how they imagine their role as a vendor, the fulfillment they gain, how they display their booths, and how they interact with customers. For example, a vendor could cherish the items they sell and use the transaction as a means to share that experience with another. Alternatively, a vendor could sell wholesale items that they see

purely as a good or product. Instances like these will reflect whether vendors understand the space as a festive, social realm (a third place), or a primarily economic sphere.

On Sensibility. Scholarship pertaining to cultural taste and sensibility may further inform an understanding of vendors' conceptualizations and practices. The preceding discussions on kitsch, rubbish, and value creation can be illuminated by considering the relationship between class and taste. Specifically, the work of Bourdieu (1984), and those prompted by his writings, may aid these considerations.

Bourdieu (1984) described how ingrained social practices inform implicit, intuitive schemas that determine how individuals orient themselves within society. In turn, these schemas compose how individuals and groups classify and categorize themselves and others. These classifications are constantly reified by taste, "a practical mastery of schemas of distribution and interpretation of... symbolism" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 556). According to Bourdieu (1984), this sensibility allows individuals to anticipate social values and meanings.

Bourdieu (1984) likens taste to a type of muscle memory, distinct from reflex, that nonetheless influences the interpretation and attribution of values. To Bourdieu (1984), attributive judgments are mostly unconscious acts that simultaneously hail the self and other into distinct social classes. Still, Bourdieu (1984) insists that these structures of opposition, always reified by taste, can be challenged by "the evocative power of the utterance, which puts things in a different light" (p. 479). This notion of linguistic power is of relevance here, as it describes how a vendor or customer can influence or alter classifications through speech, and thus participate in a miniature class (or classification) struggle. Specifically, this view may aid an understanding of how vendors, through the process of selection and salesmanship, may transform the classification of an object, say from rubbish to durable.

More interestingly, Bourdieu's (1984) work sheds light on how these decisions of taste function to articulate and negotiate character, class, and power. Vendors thus have the opportunity to intervene or corroborate the process of value reproduction. Each item's selection and sale either challenges or reifies the mental and social order that determines common sense. Those in favor of the current social order will default to explicitly codifying their preference of production to turn common beliefs into correct opinions (Bourdieu, 1984). A vendor that has luck selling certain items and conducting business according to a common *sense*, understood by flea market participants, is unlikely to challenge the prevailing sensibility. Further, comments on taste or preference may illustrate a certain identity performance that aims to resituate their internal/external perception. In sum, vendors' examples of, or comments on, taste may express the idealized type of vendor they wish to be.

Other works that extend Bourdieu's (1984) approach, but apply taste in relation to pop culture, may be of equal relevance. For instance, Wright (2015) notes that previous social and market research regarding taste confines it to the realm of the consumer, and thus frames the consumer as a "problem to be solved" (p. 118). Though myopic as a lens to understand taste, vendors' attention to preference may be partially bound to this characterization (or objectification) of consumers. Of course, vendors straddle this definition, as they are both the buyer and the seller. In turn, vendors operate within a cycle of production and consumption that is problematized by the often-conflated distinction "between taste as a complex social, sensory, aesthetic and affective phenomenon and choice or preference as a rational, economic one" (Wright, 2015, p. 119). A vendor likely to adhere to the rational, economic definition of preference is prone to view the consumer as a problem to be solved, and thus select items for their booth according to a supposed need or desire of the consumer. This practical, for-profit

axiom of taste places these vendors primarily as sellers of goods.

However, other vendors may fluctuate between these considerations of taste. Some may attribute more weight to their role as a collector or consumer, in which they would experience the affective quality of finding and acquiring a novel item. A vendor acting in consonance with this principle of taste may seek distinct items according to their social and aesthetic interests, rather than merely the items expected worth on the market. Likewise, the task of seeking items may be more fulfilling than the sale, or at least more meaningful than a chore or necessary transaction.

Finally, it is worth considering how the attitudes and decisions of vendors inform their role as mediators of taste. Wright (2015), in reference to cultural critics and the like, claims “the *skills* and *sensibilities* of strategic workers in the culture industry... become powerful arbiters for the range and characteristics of what appears before us to be tasted” (p. 142). Although much of what is peddled at flea markets is often a cultural backwash of items that were once familiar, vendors still make the decisions that determine what is available—both for purchase and for mere viewing. Here, Bourdieu’s (1984) meditation on classification reverberates. The vendors, through their tastes and evaluations, contribute to definitions of item genres, and whether they belong in the flea market. Classifications like antique, Americana, decoration, kitsch, and trash, can all be employed by vendors to resituate their items and persona. Due to their positions as mediators of items, vendors collectively establish whether the flea market is an eclectic museum of an obscure past for sale or an assemblage of wholesale bargain bins of fast-fashion and nearly expired food. The fact that many vendors with distinct sensibilities compose MFM may mean both visions and enactments of the market coexist.

Before moving on to a description of the methods I have undertaken to investigate the

various conceptions vendors have of the market, I will retrospectively review the concepts I have garnered throughout this section. First, I conveyed the existing work on flea markets and detailed how the flea market might function as a space according to Bakhtin's (1984) concept of the carnival and Oldenburg and Brissett's (1982) third place theory. Next, I illustrated the value of analyzing vendors' relationship to the items they sell, along with the items themselves. First, I employed Kulka's (1996) exploration of kitsch, then Thompson's (2017) theory of value creation and destruction, and finally, Bourdieu's (1984) work on sensibility. Together, these concepts show vendors can conceptualize the flea market contrastingly, participate in acts of value transformation, enact identity performances, and affect the flea market experience through their curation of products.

To appreciate and understand the experience and mindsets of the vendors at MFM, the following research questions will direct the trajectory of this thesis.

RQ1: How do participants (vendors) conceptualize the flea market as a space?

RQ2: What is the relationship between how vendors conceptualize the space and the merchandise they sell?

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a two-pronged, qualitative approach entailing ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews. I enacted each form of data collection following IRB approval (See Appendix A) on January 13, 2022 (Case # IRB-FY2022-378). In-depth interviews are necessary to garner an understanding of how vendors conceptualize the space. Rich descriptions from individual vendors provide particular insights that would not be established through survey results. First, I conducted observations, acting as a peripheral-member-researcher. This means not engaging in core activities and refraining from adopting the values and goals of the members (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). As I spent time in the market conducting observations, interviews occurred organically. Although the data collected through interviews is uniquely insightful, it also serves as a form of member-checking (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017) that ensures the legitimacy of the field notes taken during the observations.

Observations

The observation periods were crucial to understanding the dynamics and general tenor of MFM. I conducted four observations at MFM, each approximately four hours long. These long-form visits were distributed equally across the two days the flea market is open, meaning I experienced the condition of MFM on two Saturdays and two Sundays. Additional time was spent inside the market conducting interviews. Two of the observations were scheduled near the opening of the market, while the other two lasted until the market closed. During these observations, I paid particular attention to the conversations vendors had with customers, as well as the general demeanor they exhibited while customers perused their booths. Likewise, I took

notes on the types of items appearing within each booth, and how these items corresponded with the communication habits of the vendor. Additionally, I inspected the reoccurring rituals that occurred near the opening and closing of the market. Finally, I inspected the degree to which vendors and customers were invested in the task of selling/shopping, compared to their efforts devoted to idle socializing. My observations amounted to ten pages of field notes and four memos written shortly after each ethnographic venture. Much of my field notes were written in shorthand following noteworthy experiences. Some of the notes were taken in real-time, but I often preferred to describe them after immersing myself in ongoing events, to maintain presence and attention.

Interviews

Recruitment. Interview participants were drawn from the vendors of MFM. Vendors were asked to participate in one-on-one interviews. Nine vendors were successfully recruited as participants, one participant refused to be recorded and thus wrote down her responses while I took detailed notes of our conversation. The eight vendors that did consent to a recorded interview conversed for an average of forty-three minutes. The shortest interview duration was twenty-three minutes and the longest interview was fifty-three minutes. These times exclude portions where participants asked not to be recorded while discussing sensitive information. Often, the conversations preceded and outlasted the recorded portion of the interviews, due to the talkative nature of many vendors. These participants were selected through a process of purposive sampling, meaning the participants were recruited selectively according to the researcher's judgment, rather than randomly (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). This methodological approach to sampling allowed the strategic selection of various 'kinds' of vendors. By this, I

mean I spoke with participants with various dispositions, popularity, booth size, and niches.

Participants. As stated previously, eight vendors were recruited to participate in interviews. The ages of the participants ranged from 53 to 67 ($M = 59$). Of the participants, five identified as White (62%), one as Native American (13%), and two preferred not to say (25%). Five participants identified as female (62%) and three identified as male (38%). Six participants did not reveal their political affiliation, while one identified as a democrat and the other marked themselves as a republican. Only two participants claimed to have a full-time job (25%). The others wrote either ‘retired’ (37.5%) or ‘self-employed’ (37.5%); however, it is likely those descriptions are merely preferred synonyms, considering 100% of participants are self-employed in terms of being vendors. Participants’ time spent living in the area ranged from two to sixty-three years, with a median of twenty-nine and a half years. Their time spent running a booth at MFM ranged from less than a year to twenty years, with a median of ten years. Although demographically simple, the sample’s homogeneity accurately reflects the constituents of MFM. Likewise, the sample size represents a significant portion of the market as there are approximately thirty total vendors at MFM.

Data Collection. After receiving IRB approval, I collected data via ethnographic observations. Simultaneously, interviews were conducted utilizing a semi-structured questioning procedure. Every interview took place within the vendor’s booth, which allowed “contextual (i.e., situational) influences on social actions” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017, p. 19) to be observed. In this sense, vendor responses were organic and relevant to their typical behavior within the market. Before the interviews, a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B) was provided to each participant, attached to the informed consent document.

Each interview was derived from the same pool of questions (see Appendix C). The

interview protocol was broken into several parts. First, participants were asked to detail a typical day at the flea market. The initial set of questions, near the start of the interview, were broad, contextual questions relating to their history at MFM. Subsequent questions necessitated greater introspection from the vendors. These prompts addressed how participants derive fulfillment from their occupation, the relationships they have with their products, and how they perceive and interact with other vendors. Finally, the remaining questions concerned how participants understand MFM as a space, their idealized conceptions of the space, and tensions that might arise between competing visions of the market.

Participants were also asked probing questions elicited by their responses to the interview protocol. Often, participants would go on long tangents and tell humorous or compelling stories. The informal nature of the interviews encouraged participants to share what is most valuable to them, thus revealing their priorities and underlying philosophies as vendors. After completing the standardized interview questions, participating vendors were asked closing questions that invited them to reflect on their experience as participants, as well as how their involvement might have changed their perception of MFM or their role as a vendor.

After completing each interview, the recordings were prepared for analysis. First, they were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. These interview recordings produced one hundred eighty-eight pages of double-spaced transcripts. Identifying information such as names and locations was then removed to preserve the anonymity of the subjects. Finally, the audio recordings were deleted after the completion of the transcription process.

Data Analysis. Following the transcription process, the data were coded. First, I executed line-by-line, open coding. Each line within the transcripts was given a code that epitomizes the meaning within that line of data. Here, *in vivo* coding was also utilized by borrowing

terminology used by participants (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017) to maintain coherence and accurately reflect their descriptions. Many of the in vivo codes became important themes and sub-themes within the results section. These include *Something to Do*, *Wheelhouse*, *Real People Past*, *Buy What You Like*, and *Acquisition Syndrome*. Following open coding, a codebook was curated based on recurring and significant codes. After the initial codes were generated, themes surfaced, and synonymous codes were grouped into distinct thematic categories, they were analyzed and defined. In the subsequent focused coding phase, the codebook was applied to the remaining data

Here, I will demonstrate how a code transformed throughout these steps. Many lines of data were open coded as ‘the thrill of the hunt,’ referring to instances where vendors spoke of their enjoyment of purchasing items. After analyzing the totality of the data, the in vivo code, ‘guitar acquisition syndrome’ was adopted and modified to be the sub-theme, *Acquisition Syndrome*. This code was then canonized in the codebook and applied to an example of participants discussing the pleasure they are granted by searching for and purchasing products. This adaptation in coding allowed for a greater emphasis on the impulsive nature of hunting for products, and thus greater informed the larger theme of *Hoarding*.

Finally, emerging links, causal relationships, and hierarchies among codes were comparatively analyzed in the axial coding phase (Charmaz, 2006). Emerging themes and patterns were identified through the analysis of existing codes. They were then analyzed, organized, and explicated using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The emergent themes and the relationships between them will be explored and elaborated on in the following results section. First, I detail the measures I undertook to secure rigor and validity within my methodology.

Qualitative Rigor

Concepts of rigor and validity are complicated by the *modus operandi* of qualitative research. Qualitative research aims not to produce objective, generalizable schemes, but rather “partial, temporary, and contested” knowledge (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017, p. 193). Moreover, qualitative work cannot be reduced to the standards of quantitative inquiry. Still, there are measures qualitative researchers can follow to ensure rigor and validity.

A qualitative researcher is expected, above anything else, to be self-reflexive. Self-reflexivity is marked by transparency and introspection. Tracy and Hinrichs (2017) offer a set of eight guiding principles to act as criteria for quality and ethical qualitative research. These principles include “(1) worthy topic, (2) rich rigor, (3) sincerity, (4) credibility, (5) resonance, (6) significant contribution, (7) ethics, and (8) meaningful coherence” (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017, p. 2). In what follows, I will break down these dimensions and relate them to my methodology.

Tracy and Hinrichs (2017) define a worthy topic as “relevant, timely, significant, and compelling” (p. 2). These terms are relatively subjective, but the notion remains that the topic of the research must be something that is not obvious, challenges common-sense assumptions, or reveals something novel about the nature of social life (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). My interest in MFM stems from the fact that flea markets that allow vendors to be present are declining in numbers, and thus less accessible for study in the near future. Likewise, MFM is a worthy artifact due to the manner transactions transcend capitalistic norms of consumption. Further, the topic of vendor-based flea markets is ripe for analyzing the need for places of socialization.

Rich rigor, in qualitative work, depends on abundant, rich descriptions (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). Rigor may also be marked by complex theoretical approaches (as I have demonstrated in the literature review), attention to detail, and substantial data collection (Tracy

& Hinrichs, 2017). Likewise, rigor can be displayed through transparency in data collection and analysis. This transparency can be achieved by listing the number of interviews, time spent doing observations, and “disclosing the number of pages of typed... interview transcriptions,” (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017, p. 5) as I have provided previously.

Sincerity can also be accomplished through the transparency of methodology. Recognizing challenges or including a limitations section can be evidence of sincerity. Additionally, introspection about biases, values, and goals of the researcher can merit sincerity (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). Even using the first person “I” to remind readers of the researcher’s positionality and voice may lend to sincerity (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017).

Credibility in qualitative research can be achieved through the inclusion of detailed descriptions and dialogue, as well as multi-faceted forms of data collection. “Qualitative researchers attain credibility through the use of thick description, crystallization of data, evidence of multivocality... and engaging in member reflections with participants” (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017, p. 6). The use of thick description provides the reader with a rich account of the data, which allows the reader to follow along with the researcher’s conclusions, rather than simply being told of the findings. Crystallization can also service credibility, as it “entails the inclusion of multiple data points” (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017, p. 6). Often this means pursuing several means of data collection, as I have done using ethnographic observations and personal interviews. Similarly, I have encouraged member reflections by sharing preliminary findings (or ‘hunches’) from observations with my interviewees to allow opportunities for “questions, critique, feedback, affirmation, and even collaboration” (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017, p. 7).

The term ‘resonance’ deals with how accessible and impactful the study is to the reader. Generally, the goal is to elicit connections in the mind of the reader and inspire future work that

can build off of the research. The presentation of the work must hold the “potential to aesthetically affect its readers” (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017, p. 7). Similarly, ‘significant contribution’ entails that “the findings extend, transform, or complicate existing bodies of knowledge” (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017, p. 8). Considering the last notable study on flea markets is from the late nineties, I hope to extend that scholarship, as well as integrate new theories, and provide a novel understanding of class, taste, consumption, and public socialization.

Tracy and Hinrichs’ (2017) notion of ethics is broken into four parts: I enacted procedural ethics simply by following the standards presented by IRB. I also cautiously adhered to situational ethics by respecting the wishes and boundaries of participants, while minimizing the social risk the study could have posed to them. Relational ethics were also considered, meaning I acted empathetically while in conversation with the participants. Many seemed to enjoy the conversation. Lastly, I have followed exiting ethics by not framing the participants in a negative light and respecting their requests to go off the record.

Meaningful coherence is the last principle offered by Tracy and Hinrichs (2017). Simply put, meaningful coherence requires consistency between the included literature, appropriate research questions, methods, data, and findings (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). The study should be wholistically sound and intuitive, in the sense that the sections must flow, the literature and research questions must maintain relevancy, and the interior logic of the work must be evident. In sum, qualitative rigor entails constant self-reflexivity and transparency that aims to ensure sound and ethical work.

RESULTS

Before I discuss the most prevalent themes that emerged from the collected data, I owe the reader some tangential context regarding the vendors and the market itself. Many of the following insights were garnered through an interview with someone in a managerial position at the market. To start, the market is situated within the heart of the city's historic downtown. The building itself is equally as historic as its surroundings, considering it was originally constructed in 1914. Until recently, it was owned and operated by the founder—a passionate woman who dedicated her life to the success of the market and the vendors that composed it. This venture was apparently trialsome, considering women in the area were not often respected as entrepreneurs. In the early days, the market primarily operated as a collaborative produce stand. Similarly, the market did not allow vendors to store inventory in their booths until about twenty years ago. Of course, allowing vendors to use the booths as storage throughout the week, rather than forcing them to haul items in and out each day, altered how the vendors utilized the market.

Within the last few years, the original owner passed away. At this time, the ownership was transferred to a board of trustees, since she had no children. In fact, several vendors recalled the founder often repeating, “I didn't have children because the flea market is my baby.” Near the time of her death, a long-time caretaker of the owner was offered a position as manager, which she still proudly holds. These delegations of power are important because they have impacted the market's operations and social atmosphere. Many appreciate the aforementioned manager because of her intimacy with the market; however, most vendors spoke skeptically about the involvement of the board of trustees due to the trustees' emotional separation from the store.

Another interesting facet of MFM that illustrates its unique contours is the fact that the

founder also owned a series of rental properties immediately surrounding the market. Of course, these are now owned by the board of trustees. Still, four vendors live in those buildings, constituting a small village nearly attached to the market. Similarly, several vendors are roommates exemplifying how relationships within the market spill out into vendors' private lives. Likewise, at least three couples (two married) jointly run booths at MFM, either separately or together. In other cases, individual vendors commute (sometimes hours) to the market because they prefer the social nature of the market compared to any in their area. This ongoing excursion and the culminating mileage on their vehicles no doubt undercut their profit margin; yet, the vendors did not seem to mind.

Expectedly, most vendors expect to earn some cash for their efforts. However, an overwhelming majority of participants described profits to be secondary to other gratifications provided by their experience at the market. Although this non-profit motive aligned with my expectations, the alternative rationales listed by vendors transcended mere social utility. Surprisingly, vendors reported a myriad of motives that galvanize them to be vendors at MFM.

Five overarching themes emerged through coding interviews and reviewing fieldnotes. Each theme addresses how vendors with largely non-profit motives are fulfilled and inspired through their work at or in relation to the market. These themes are the following: (1) Life After Labor; (2) The Primacy of People; (3) Specific Merchandise; (4) Hoarding; and (5) Identity Maintenance. Each theme will be composed of sub-themes that further clarify the complexion of vendors' fulfillment processes. Following the explication of the final theme, I will discuss their relevance to the research questions. I will then discuss the implications and limitations of the study.

Life After Labor

All but one of the vendors I spoke to were at least semi-retired. Many had spent their careers working at the same local factory. Their instilled work ethics and long histories of hard labor resulted in retirements that felt abrupt and unfulfilling. For this reason, participants sought out ways to fill their time and occupy their minds. Some vendors initially wished to re-enter the traditional job market but found themselves out of options due to extenuating circumstances. For instance, Laura, who enjoys people-watching with her dog from her booth, commented on how her disability limited her post-retirement job options: “Because I can't write. My mind is fine. I can still use the computer some, but you know, I got all these skills. But who's gonna hire me... handicapped... and get big insurance rates?” This instance exemplifies how MFM serves as an accessible, soft transition into retirement for many vendors. The theme ‘Life After Labor’ encompasses how vendors utilize MFM to address problems that occur after retirement. The sub-theme, ‘Something to Do’ discusses how vendors use MFM as a means to fill voids of time and fulfillment. ‘Supplemental Income’ illustrates how participants use the minor flow of income to stay afloat and feel economically secure after retirement. Finally, the sub-theme ‘Autonomy’ explains how vendors are attracted to MFM because of the agency they are granted, which most vendors did not experience in their original careers.

Something to Do. Participants often expressed a fixation with being occupied. Winona, a retired Goodwill worker that salvages and alters clothes, described it plainly: “This is my thing that gets me out of the house for two days a week.” Yet, to many, it meant more than fighting off boredom. This mild obsession usually manifested in either a concern for the body or the mind. Andy, a vendor that specializes in coins and sports memorabilia, spoke in length on how running his booth aids his mental wellbeing. “I've got to keep busy. Because if I don't, I'll just go insane.

Like I've got to have my mind focused on something. And if I don't, you know, you could lose your cookies." He later added, "With what's going on I got to keep myself functioning. So, I don't have a nervous breakdown or attack or something." For Andy, the flea market was an escape from the stresses that come with being stuck at home. MFM provided vendor and customer interactions that Andy considered suitable distractions.

Other vendors described the impulse to keep working after retirement in terms of physical momentum. Beth, a vendor who identifies as an artist, lightheartedly explained: "We got this firm belief in my family, if you stay busy, you stay alive. Because if you stop you die. I mean, if you just sit on the couch, you're gonna get sick, you're gonna gain weight, you're gonna rust, you know? I've always got that in my head. If you stop, you die."

This working-class mantra pervades the flea market. In fact, while I was there, one prominent vendor refused to go home despite being sick with what he later discovered to be COVID pneumonia. Truly, most vendors have a commitment to working after retirement. Andy mentioned earlier, stated, "It gives me something to do because we're retired. I'm going to keep at it as long as I can." For many, MFM is a vessel for the last stage of their working and social lives. This pattern becomes problematic as vendors grow older and are thus faced with the decision to close down their booths. These decisions are often spoken of in a way that frames the event, not as a second retirement, but rather as a resignation from the world. Sally expressed concern for an elderly vendor: "I think she's ready to retire. But she doesn't want to because this is her only place to get out." In this sense, some retired vendors cling to their part-time occupations at MFM to preserve their social worlds and maintain their self-image as subjects of the present, rather than peoples of the past.

Supplemental Income. Since most vendors are retired, for many, their social security or

disability checks are main sources of income. This budget, in turn, impacts the types of items they can buy for their booth but also incentivizes them to start a flea market booth in the first place. Although vendors are not attempting to get rich quickly, most expect to earn enough for a net positive balance. One participant even referred to it as “beer money.” Another said his social security was “really not enough to be happy with.” Laura described the gig slightly differently: “Some people do the stock market, some people put into savings accounts—we chose to do it that way because, you know, I don't know, because we didn't get to know that much about stock markets.” Laura’s comment illustrates how vendors utilize the space to make supplemental income because they lack the experience to do so in a more traditional way.

Some vendors even recognized that they do not make enough money to justify the time and labor put into searching for items and running the booth. The manager I spoke to conveyed a similar sentiment: “I do have a lot of elderly people that do supplementary income this way... And a lot of them don't even include their time. They're not getting paid for being here all day. It doesn't equal out. They're doing this because they love to do it. Anybody that comes in here with the idea that they're going to get rich quick, is sadly mistaken.”

This realization—although not generalizable to all vendors—signals a larger connection between the minimal financial support they receive and their motivation to continue working as vendors. Many are satisfied with building little capital in comparison to other business ventures. However, the point is to make enough money to justify and fuel their hobbies, habits, and social needs. Through this lens, time spent hunting for items or running a booth are not expenditures or potential losses. Instead, the potential sale justifies the purchase of items and the accompanying experiences of buying and selling. These insights will be discussed in greater detail in the following sections. For now, note that vendors rely on MFM for supplementary income because

it enables a self-sustaining process that they enjoy taking part in.

Autonomy. Given that most vendors spent their lives working under some form of a boss, it is no surprise that they revel in the chance to enact agency in their work lives at the market. Three aspects of autonomy are frequently celebrated at MFM. Firstly, the market is hailed for being unregulated. Other than being up-to-date with fire codes and not selling outright illegal products, MFM exists as a libertarian space. Certain consequences of this feature of the market are potentially problematic, as vendors are not legally required to cross-reference new products with recently stolen goods (in contrast to pawn shops), expired and repackaged food can be sold for standard prices, scalping and pirating are actively rewarded, and sales tax is often skirted entirely. Daryl, (after disclosing that he bought a bag of pretzels filled with spiders) summarized the community's feelings towards the market's laissez-faire approach: "They think it's a good thing. Yeah. it's part of their freedom, I think, as an American, and they don't want that taken away. You know, the old days are still sort of existing here." This comment exemplifies the American attitude that prioritizes liberty in the marketplace and nostalgia for workplaces without government or managerial oversight.

Secondly, vendors derive a sense of autonomy from having ownership over their time. There is no impending economic threat of being fired if they miss a shift. They will not make any money that day, but they are not required to be there. Although the market is only open during set hours, vendors have total flexibility in their schedules. Beth illustrated this well, claiming, "Some of them will work here in the morning and go home or go to work in the afternoon. Some of them don't even want to show up. That's why a lot of people do it." Beth's comment exemplifies how vendors favor the market due to its pliable conditions.

Finally, vendors claim to benefit from the agency to sell (almost) any item, for any price,

to any person. No one can be scolded or punished by any authority for selling items representing most ideological beliefs, or any transgressive materials. Beth, who sells ‘trash-to-treasure’ items that occasionally resemble the occult, recalled one instance where she felt empowered by this authority when someone patronized her: “‘I’m gonna pray for you. Look at the stuff you worship.’ And I’m like, dude, it’s Halloween. It’s funny. He started going off, and I said, ‘You know what? Get out of my booth.’ Yeah, I can do that.” Beth later summarized this overall sense of autonomy concisely: “It’s up to us when to open, it’s up just who comes in the booth, it’s up to us what we sell our products for, nobody can tell us what we sell our stuff for. Nobody can tell us who we can sell to. And no one tells us when we can leave when we can’t leave.”

Beth’s comment displays the agency vendors are granted within the market. This authority allows them to craft and peddle goods according to their interests, no matter how taboo. The same sense of agency contributes to the freeform interactions that vendors partake in.

The Primacy of People

Even the most economically-involved vendors of MFM benefit from the social dimension of MFM. The format of the market depends on vendors attracting attention and having personal encounters with the customers. Moreover, an established clientele is necessary for the market’s success. The mode of the market itself attracts predominantly generous and gregarious folk. Some even claimed sociability was a prerequisite to being a vendor: “You have to like people. You can’t do this without liking people.” The theme, ‘The Primacy of People’ epitomizes the centrality of social interactions within the market. The sub-themes, ‘Social Utility’ and ‘Small Philanthropy’ detail the fulfillment vendors derive from social interactions and the small acts of kindness stimulated within the market, respectively.

Social Utility. At MFM, it is a rare occasion to see a vendor sitting alone inside their booth. Unless they are working on a project, most individuals are chatting in pairs or small groups. Each corridor functions as a block of a neighborhood, where vendors loiter between their booths as if they were their porches. Vendors generally do not mind leaving their booths unattended for short durations. They worried about shoplifters but try to implement as much trust in the public as possible. Those more concerned with profits and less trusting of people stick to their booths. Similarly, profit-motivated vendors spoke more passionately about defending their booths from the threat of shoplifters. These types of vendors were somehow situated into their own neighborhoods. Even still, their customers are likely to participate in idle chatter within their booths. In contrast, a manager I spoke to claimed, “For some of them, it’s just socialization. I know for a lot of them, they probably don’t make their booth rent every weekend. But some of them, throughout the years, have stayed here to have socialization with other people.” Clearly, some are driven to participate in the flea market because it fulfills a social need—especially considering the prior theme of ‘life after labor.’

The network of vendors certainly constitutes a social fabric. Some have known each other for decades. Every participant described the market either as a community or family. Beth used both terms to describe the atmosphere: “It’s kind of a big family up here, actually. Yeah, it’s a community. You got your grumpy ones and your nice ones. And you get the ones that don’t give a crap. Yeah, it’s just a family.” Beth’s definition of family was wholistic, much like the manager’s: “They’re just like any other typical family. They have their days when they’ll gossip about one another, but have each other’s back in a heartbeat.” Although gossip probably contributes to the social environment of MFM, it was hardly mentioned in my interviews. The same manager gave a more positive description later: “It’s just like a big family. Everybody

knows everybody. Everybody knows what everybody's doing.” This comment illustrates the familial nature of the market. Indeed, the market operates as a second home for many, where fictive kinships are developed.

Although the vendors garner fulfillment from interactions with other vendors, many seemed to enjoy their relationships with customers more. Laura had this to say about her decision to commute over an hour to MFM: “We like the way this one is run because it’s more like a storefront, where you can have more personal contact with your customers.” She later extended the family metaphor to include her clientele. It is common for vendors to establish relationships with customers that last for decades. During my observations, I witnessed a few of the same customers frequenting the same booths, nearly all day, both days the market is open, each weekend. This behavior is particularly telling because the available products throughout the store dwindle throughout the weekend, meaning the customers are likely to not find anything new the second day. One couple spoke of their most fervent fan fondly: “Pete is our favorite because he’s been with us for so long. Almost thirty years.”

Laura’s description of another long-time customer illustrates another social tendency within the market: “Like the gentleman who just left, I guess I’ve known him ever since we’ve been here. He lives an apartment over here by himself and he used to come all the time—he’s not able to drive, you know. But we know those things about each other.” That last line both shows that there is a familial status between vendor and customer, but also a correlation between fulfillment and disclosure.

During my first observation period, it became clear that there is a lower social threshold for individuals to disclose information typically considered sensitive. By this, I mean vendors and customers happily share information with strangers that others might only divulge to trusted

friends and family. For instance, two individuals spoke brazenly about a mutual friend's descent into a life of crime. Generally, vendors and participants alike are expected to share stories and narratives about their lives. This led to vendors establishing meaningful relationships with clientele who simply bought Hot Wheels from them once a week, for example. Another vendor, Laura, spoke somberly of the loss of a long-standing customer: "She didn't come in and that was very unlike her. She passed away. But her husband still comes in. And it makes me feel good that he comes in and feels comfortable sharing. I mean, he cried the first time he told me about it." Each vendor's success is dependent on developing a steady clientele, who they usually befriend in the process. Often, their discussions revolve around the products. However, many end up quickly sharing aspects of their private lives. Between vendors and solidified clientele, these disclosures are mutual and fulfilling. Yet, in my experience as an unfamiliar individual, the vendors did most of the talking.

Even before conducting interviews, any passive interest in a booth or item meant I was a captive audience for the vendors with a knack for storytelling and entertainment. I discuss how this emergent trait relates to identity performance and maintenance in an upcoming section. However, it is worth mentioning here because it illustrates yet another way MFM serves as a social utility for vendors. Beyond companionship and community, vendors thrive on the ability to share their stories and reaffirm their identities.

Small Philanthropy. Another distinct way to understand the relationship between the non-profit motives illustrated by vendors and their affinity to the social is to look at small acts of kindness. I have termed this sub-theme 'small philanthropy' to encompass even the mildest displays of generosity and affection.

Collaborative efforts—especially assisting the elderly—are respected and appreciated

across MFM. For some, it is a ritual to help the oldest woman throw a tarp over her booth and ‘lock it’ for the night. Others provide frivolous, yet pleasant services. One woman explained the ritual she shares with a vendor in her ‘neighborhood:’ “The little girl across the row, she’ll come over and organize my jewelry for me.” Likewise, vendors are always on the lookout for products other vendors might want to have or sell, meaning referrals are constant.

Other vendors partake in more serious acts of cooperation. For instance, Daryl has a history of helping fix up the market, since he has experience as a contractor. Laura mentioned that a fellow vendor drove out to her house to fix her heat for free. Andy, the coin collector, stated that a buddy is helping him pay his rent: “I can’t afford to pay \$80 rent. So, a buddy of mine says, ‘You know what, if I put some sports cards and other things in there,’ he said, ‘I’ll split the rent with you.’” This form of mutual aid represents a style of symbiosis and generosity that is promoted within the market.

Beth, the trash-to-treasure artist, has made connections with a local museum to receive out-of-commission dolls. These dolls are donated to Beth to either be restored or transformed, then sold. Of course, this act of charity is appreciated and reciprocated. “I’m going to take whatever I sell, and I’ll give it back to the museum for donation to restore their train.” This act of small philanthropy exemplifies how acts of kindness are valued within MFM, and naturally extend to connections outside the market.

Additionally, the act of sharing is commonplace at MFM. Winona mentioned she takes joy in seeing clientele visit her simply to eat candy from the complimentary bowl in her booth: “They’ll just come down, get candy and leave. And that’s what they come for. That’s what it is there for. I don’t mind one bit.” Others mentioned that they will occasionally just give items out for free if they can spare it. Beth provided this motto: “Sometimes I give it away. And everyone

is like, ‘You can’t give that away!’ Well, yeah, whatever.” Here, the act of sharing supersedes any profit motive. I actually encountered this phenomenon while looking at a jigsaw puzzle. Since the vendor did not have change for the cash I had, she told me to take it, saying, “Maybe give me a couple dollars another time.” Similarly, some vendors spoke of passing stagnant (unsellable) items along to other vendors, hoping they will have better luck.

In many instances, the desire to share a hobby the vendor partakes in causes them to lower their prices. Joel spoke on this in length:

Usually, I'll cut a kid a better deal than I would an adult. Because I want to bring them into the hobby, and out of playing video games all day long. They use their imagination more than, you know. Sometimes, you know, I might lose money. But to me, it makes me feel better. You know, I'm not even in it to make money. Because usually, I don't make money. You know, I might break even, that's about it. That's enough for me, you know.

A separate vendor, Daryl, also offered up the act of sharing the hobby as a particular pleasure. To him, it extends beyond sharing items, but also information and passion: “That's what I do best, share. You know, that's what I'm really good at. I'm good at acquiring information on guitars and sending it right out to my customer.” He later continued, “I enjoy seeing the look on a kid's face when he gets a guitar that he loves. Because that's me... So, if I can do that on a daily basis, I'm a pretty happy guy.” Andy, the coin collector, explained that he enjoyed “helping people enjoy the hobby they’re in,” and talking to them about it all day long.

Personal Investment in Merchandise

The merchandise available at MFM is assorted, to say the least. In one trip, a customer could purchase a bag of old McDonald’s toys, a refurbished television, a tacky snow globe, someone’s lost photo album, a pack of cigarettes, and a pair of hand-knitted gloves. Although

individual booths can be eclectic on their own, it is important to remember none of the items are there by chance. Each item is *selected*, no matter how carefully or haphazardly, by individuals. Indeed, all vendors assess the potential value of each item they opt to buy and sell. To some dealers, this value is evaluated according to profit margins alone. Yet, to those with largely non-profit motives, the items are chosen according to more complex agendas. The theme, ‘Personal Investment in Merchandise’ considers the personal attachments vendors associate with the products they craft, buy, and sell. First, the sub-theme, ‘Wheelhouse,’ discusses how vendors construct niches to establish a clientele and reinforce a reputation and self-image. ‘Extending Item Lifespans’ entails vendors’ urges to reintroduce diminished items into the market through lateral cycling. Further, ‘Micro Markets’ illustrates how vendors select items on behalf of personal relationships with customers, and ‘Real People Past’ explores how vendors negotiate historical authenticity and sentiment through the products they sell. Each sub-theme represents how vendors’ relationships with products reciprocally inform their conception of the space.

Wheelhouse. The first thing that informs vendors’ buying habits is their wheelhouse. In short, no matter how varied the items in the booth may seem, every vendor has a niche. This niche might be based on their personal interests, what they are knowledgeable about, what they have had the best luck selling, or simply what they are known for. For example, Andy specializes in coins and baseball cards, Daryl resells music equipment, Beth crafts and sells Rockabilly and Halloween-themed items, Joel buys action figures, and another vendor (a non-participant) exclusively sells used electronics. According to Andy, “The more you can put in here [the booth], and the more select items that you have, the better your business is going to be.” Andy’s quote displays a meta-conception that the market favors vendors with unique specialties.

The construction of these wheelhouses allows vendors to recognize good deals within

their niche, build a reputation that reinforces their preferred identities, develop a committed clientele, and establish reliable connections with vendors and customers alike. Beth described how the process of curating a wheelhouse and building a clientele are synonymous: “I’ve been here ten years and they know that I paint weird stuff and Christmas or Halloween stuff and Rockabilly, and people bring new shoes in, and I paint them. So, you got to work up a clientele.” Often, referrals from other vendors and customers help solidify these specialized trades. Beth later elaborated, “They know what my husband collects, and they know what I collect... One kid brought me a troll because I do troll dolls. So, he brought me a troll Ninja Turtle.” Likewise, Daryl summarized the process of referring customers to other vendors well: “She’ll say, ‘I spotted you a guitar.’ They’ll tell me where one is. Everybody in this building knows I’m the guitar guy. And if somebody comes in saying, ‘Where do I sell this guitar?’ they’ll send them right over here.” Again, the interesting part is that the construct of a wheelhouse or niche contributes to a self-sustaining process that enables vendors to conduct better business while affirming their self-image as experts within their field.

Extending Item Lifespans. Aside from the occasional fluke, every item that enters MFM is on its second life. Indeed, this flea market is a liminal space for items on their journey from the factory to the household, and finally to the landfill. Most vendors are cognizant of this fact. Some even dig items out of the dump to reintroduce novel products into the market. Many participants are proud of delaying products’ inevitable ends. Vendors at MFM typically extend the lifespan of items either passively through lateral cycling actively or actively through artisanry (often called ‘trash-to-treasure’).

Lateral cycling is a process where items do not disseminate to the public but circulate among second-hand dealers. This occurs when vendors sell or trade items with each other, as

well as when they buy from auctions, salvage yards, swap meets, pawnshops, and thrift stores.

Joel described how he wound up with the same twelve-inch Hitler action figure twice:

So, [a customer] bought [a Hitler action figure] and took it home, and he had it for, I don't know, six, eight months. And then I went and bought a big Godzilla with the money. And I had it set up there at the top [of the booth]. And then that one guy's son came in. He said, 'Hey, I need that Godzilla.' And I said, 'Really? What do you got?' He goes, 'Well, I got this Hitler.' So, he brought that in. And so, we did a little trade.

In this case, a peculiar item traveled from a client to Joel, then an interested friend of Joel's, onto that friend's son, then back to Joel. Later, he went on to describe an eerily similar instance: "And then there's the Osama figure. I sold that at a toy show. Yeah, the same guy I bought from, he paid \$200 for it." These examples may be strange on their face, but they illustrate the non-linear trajectory of items within the market. Similarly, they exemplify how the value of an item can fluctuate enough for these sequential sales and trades to be possible. Finally, these examples are insights into the mind of a collector. This pathology will be discussed in greater detail later; however, it is important to note how the collectors (vendors included) focused on the initial acquisition of the object, rather than permanent ownership.

Vendors also practice extending the lives of objects through artistry. For some, this means restoring and painting an old bike. For others, this process is more creatively driven. These 'trash-to-treasure' vendors are renowned within the store for their work and cult followings. Laura had this to say about a fellow vendor she admired: "She makes the neatest things. She makes birdbaths out of old glass. And she makes wind chimes out of silverware. She takes jeans and repurposes them into old bell bottoms by cutting them up and stitching in lace." Another vendor (a non-participant) knits decorative cases for small notepads.

Beth is arguably the most prolific 'trash-to-treasure' artist in the store. She retails old

dolls into creepy effigies, grandfather clocks into themed bookcases, and troll dolls into cryptic totems. The manager I spoke to said this of Beth's work: "Yeah, I love the recycled stuff. That's the reason why I like Beth's stuff so much. Because she revamps it and reuses it." Trash-to-treasure artists also participate in lateral cycling. Beth shamelessly claimed, "I actually dumpster dive in trash cans. And people give me stuff all the time. I shop here all the time, too. Matter of fact, I just spent ten bucks at the lady next door." By participating in lateral cycling while attentively altering every object they buy, the artists actively transform the value of the items in correspondence with their own tastes, along with the tastes of their clientele.

Micro Markets. The interests of a vendor's clientele proved to be of equal importance to their own dedication to preserving the lifespan of items and operating within their niches. Most vendors select merchandise primarily based on their own tastes, rather than what might be most profitable based on national market trends. The exception to this rule occurs once they have established a clientele and familial relationships, in which vendors then seek out certain items for particular persons. This theme is more prevalent and specific than expected. Winona detailed the interests of her clientele: "I have one customer that looks for vases. I have one customer that comes in, and he's into knives. And then there was another customer, well, he likes big lighters. So, you get to know what they're looking for." The rest of her booth is filled with aesthetic dishware and jewelry. Still, because she knows a certain person likes big lighters, she has now become a small collector of big lighters. "You know what they're looking for, so when you're shopping and you see that, I know the right price. And, of course, you pick it up because you know such and such might be interested."

Laura collects NASCAR Hot Wheels and Harley Davidson apparel, despite reporting not having much of an interest in either, simply because her clientele likes them. "I know what my

customers are looking for... I know he's into NASCAR and is a truck driver." It is important to note that clientele does not refer to a generalization, but rather specific persons. This becomes clear when considering that clientele place specific requests. Laura recounted that she does not like to buy R-rated movies but will if they are requested: "I do special orders for when customers ask me. But those are kept in drawers down here. They'll give me their order. And then they come pick them up." The phenomenon of customer requests epitomizes the desire for transactions to be fused with social interactions. In these instances, the customer purposefully inserts a middleman, and thus extra costs, between them and their sought-after goods. Alternatively, this system seems more traditional whenever artists are requested to craft a certain type of product (for example, one vendor was asked to knit portable 'pockets' for empty Ziplock bags, so customers could always carry around a fresh 'doggy bag' for leftovers) In either case, vendors become merchants that primarily cater to the needs of the smallest markets—the individual buyer.

Real People Past. Finally, vendors and customers were drawn toward items that they felt resembled authentic pastness. I employ the term 'authentic pastness' here to epitomize how participants considered products to convey tangible connections to the history of working-class people. When asked what makes something a treasure, Daryl replied, "For most people, it's either something their grandfather had, or something that reminds them of grandpa, which holds sentimental value." However, vendors conveyed mixed messages about what items are considered more historically 'real' than others. The manager I spoke to provided the term, 'real people past,' concerning the following context: "There's been some stuff from World War Two in here, some old letters, postcards, that sort of thing... You're encountering what I call 'real people past.' Not Da Vinci or whatever, like you would see in a museum." The definition of an

authentic item of the past seems clear in this passage. She proceeded to expand the definition to relate to class: "I'm talking about the everyday man, the everyday working man." Following this description, she expanded her definition further: "You know, things that you don't see anymore... Books and some of the other things I'm encountering here that are becoming things of the past. When you start thinking about it. There's a lot of stuff." Her examples demonstrate that MFM functions as a museum of the past to some.

Already, it is apparent that 'real people past' and the concept of authentic pastness is a subjective value judgment dependent on nostalgia and the cultural construction of sentimental value. For instance, Andy spoke fairly of his affinity for coin collecting in terms of pastness: "I'm telling you, if you could take an old coin and pull DNA off of it to see whose actual hand it went through. It's like, oh, the stuff I've touched. Whose hand could that have been in?" This attribution seems reasonable, considering the literal age of the items. However, Andy and the manager spoke of sports memorabilia in the same manner. The manager had this to say:

Even baseball cards. I'm not a sports person, but I've seen a lot of cool sports stuff come through, that people have had. Old baseball cards. My grandfather, he was born in 1918. He served in World War Two. And his most favorite baseball player was George Brett. And one of the vendors in here had a picture of him with the finger. It's a rarity. And you know, I'm like, oh, wow, and that brings back memories. Whenever you're walking around, it's all memories.

At this point, the definition has been stretched thin due to a categorical problem. The prior quote about baseball memorabilia confirms Daryl's instinct that value is influenced by generational nostalgia and sentiments related to the incitement of memories. However, it poses a question. What *types* of items retain a sense of authentic pastness? Further, the initial description is based on a class attribution and the fact that the postcards and letters were written from distinct perspectives within the working class. These attributes still make sense in reference to out-of-

commission coins because they were handled by common people of history. However, broadening authentic pastness to include baseball cards suddenly invites the question: Do items of mass production—especially pop culture artifacts—constitute ‘real people past’? This question signals an overarching issue regarding what types of items retain cultural significance and authenticity.

The answer, for vendors at MFM, is essentially, yes. Pop culture artifacts, such as baseball cards, movie posters, Elvis records, and even action figures—no matter how mass-produced—can convey authentic pastness, to *some*. The tension between the legitimacy of historical artifacts and mass-manufactured items cues a uniquely postmodern problem. Before mass production and the ubiquity of pop culture, artifacts of pastness were more or less one of a kind. Since then, culturally significant items have garnered status through their mass production and consumption. However, it is exactly that omnipresence that grants those products that historic quality. In short, items of mass production entail ‘real people past’ because they compose the mediated environment of common peoples of the past.

As simple as that inference reads, there is still something problematic at its core. Vintage items of the distant past, like the postcards, photo albums, and letters listed previously, were products of dialogue. The manager was right to speak about them in terms of class because many of the aforementioned artifacts did not begin as mere products. Instead, they exist as recorded events of everyday life. Now, considering again the baseball card dilemma, pop culture artifacts are products of dissemination, designed for mass consumption. Yet, people inevitably form long-lasting attachments with these products because they equate to common denominators of culture used to organize their social lives and memories around. Vendors have opportunities to exhibit agency by recontextualizing or transforming these products. However, this exploration of ‘real

people past’ illustrates how vendors value items of mass production according to pop culture’s sheer dominance over the social. This sub-theme may prove to be insightful in the following discussion of hoarding.

Hoarding

Hoarding proved to be a pertinent theme for vendors and customers at MFM. The term ‘hoarding’ is a subjective value judgment about the types of items being collected and the fixation on constant collection. Simply collecting products does not make someone a hoarder. Not every vendor mentioned here would be defined as hoarders according to the common definition. Much of this distinction has to do with the societal acceptance of that specific form of collecting. However, they all share similar practices and tendencies within MFM. To preface, the goal here is to understand how inclinations to acquire items inform conceptions of the space and the products sold within. It is apparent that vendors utilize the flea market both to enable and cope with their hoarding tendencies. Within this larger theme of hoarding, I discuss how vendors use their booths to further their own personal collections, the experiential aspects of acquisition, as well as potential underlying mechanisms of hoarding.

Buy What You Like. Every participant that held non-profit motives claimed the secret to success, besides being social and establishing a clientele, was to buy for yourself. On its face, this sub-theme is synonymous with the ‘Wheelhouse’ sub-theme. However, the focus here is that the distinction between vendors’ personal collections and booths at the market is transient. Of course, not every vendor that buys items for their personal collection is a hoarder. Many of the hoarders claimed to move more items from their personal collection into the market. When I asked Andy where he sourced his products from, he replied, “From my personal collection.

Things I bought myself. Had it for years, took it up here.” In this sense, MFM is an outlet for his abundance of items, like a spillover container for his personal collections.

Beth and her husband Joel described their booths in similar manners. Beth stated, “We also have storage, and our house is filled to the max too. But yeah, it's also storage. So, a lot of times if we don't make the rent.... we just bounce off and say, well, it's storage.” Joel's description signals a paradox within the utility of his booth concerning hoarding. First, Joel claimed that he opened the booth because Beth told him he was, “Overtaking the house.” Yet, he later added: “I originally opened it up the booth to acquire stuff that I need from my own personal collection.” To Joel, the booth functions as extra storage for his collection of action figures, and a means of getting rid of them, while simultaneously serving as a fuel source for his ongoing collection. Sometimes he will even mark his favorite products outrageously high, so they do not sell. In fact, Joel and others encourage new vendors buy what they like, “because you might be stuck with it for a while,” and it just might become part of your permanent collection. Buying items for personal reasons, rather than purely for profit, is likely more fulfilling and engaging than buying wholesale items simply because they are likely to sell. However, this motto emphasizes the constant acquisition of consumer products.

Acquisition Syndrome. When speaking to a manager, she reflected, “I think it just gets into their blood. And it's kind of addictive, I guess for some of them, because I have noticed one thing, the majority of my vendors are hoarders. They might not see it that way, but I do.” It is this compulsion that pervades both vendors and customers at MFM. What most vendors described as the thrill of the hunt or treasure hunting, Daryl described as ‘acquisition syndrome.’ Here, I am modifying his original term that was specific to the guitar industry: “There's such a thing as what we call in the business of guitars. It's called GAS. Guitar Acquisition Syndrome.

Okay, so I'm a heavy... I'm heavily laden with guitar acquisition syndrome.” He later emphasized that it is the acquisition of the item that is desired, not necessarily the subsequent ownership or use of the item: “It's a thrill. It's like hunting big game. It's almost anticlimactic once you get it sometimes.” My earlier analysis of Joel’s history with lateral cycling and the Hitler action figure becomes relevant again here. Still, some vendors experience the thrill of the hunt without participating in serious hoarding. Regardless of their ability to self-regulate this habit, this inclination proved to be a propulsive impetus for vendors that are not primarily motivated by profits.

Acquisition syndrome is a phenomenon shared by vendors and customers alike. Many vendors reported that their ascension to vendor began with their experience as customers. Beth commented on the trend she witnessed through the years: “So, a lot of them coming here and they want gratification right now. That's the best way to put it. They're looking for something they want to gratification. They first come in just to see what it's like, and then they get hooked.” Beth aptly describes here the dopamine individuals experience when they add a new item to their collection. This instant satisfaction results in an incessant cycle of consumption.

Pathology. Vendors outlined a number of rationalizations and effects relating to hoarding. Here, I will provide a few rationalizations and effects of hoarding that the vendors contributed. Firstly, some participants were uncertain why they have a challenging time throwing stuff out. The most certain answers revolved around the notion that it would be a waste. In this sense, they are not wrong to feel guilty. As flea market vendors, they are the last bastion before items reach the landfill. Consequently, vendors attempt to prolong the lifespan of items. Even without alteration, vendors expressed that most of their collections, including rubbish, hold potential value. Joel stated, “I’ve got boxes of what you would call junk... I just hate throwing

stuff away... It could be of use to someone, you know?" For this reason, vendors are not troubled by selling or trading items, because the items are not being wasted. Of course, these potential values are mostly speculative until someone buys them.

Secondly, it seems that hoarding is a long-standing issue for some, and that their old age further complicates an already stressful situation. Andy reported having immense mental health struggles related to being in the process of moving due to an immanent domain ruling: "We've got like seventy years' worth of stuff built up in one house. We don't know what to do with all this, like, where are we going to put it? And it's either pack it up and take it to the new place or throw it away. Well, I started out with two trash cans. I'm up to four." His testimony is evidence that hoarding can be more than just a refusal to throw things away. Instead, hoarding at MFM is more dependent on the gradual accumulation of items. Andy continued:

Right now, my house looks like a storage unit. I've got boxes and totes, and everything is just packed full of stuff. Well, we need to start taking them down to new place and getting them empty and putting stuff in place. Because I can't even move my furniture because some of the furniture I got, I can't even get to it right now. You know? But you know how stressful that is? After 51 years in one spot. It's hard.

Andy's story illustrates not only the residual nature of hoarding but also the continual stress individuals might experience as they collect more and more items. This stress contributes to a self-image, where the cluttered nature of their home or booth extends to their headspace. Thus, MFM offers an outlet to unload excessive collections, but also a space to ease the anxieties that might accompany hoarding.

Identity Maintenance

The last major theme that emerged from the data is identity maintenance. Simply put, this

theme epitomizes how vendors use the space not only to maintain a life after labor, fulfill a social utility, interact with specific merchandise, and either enable or inhibit their hoarding habits; but also, to perform certain identities and correct their self-images as hoarders. Herein, I will discuss the concept of scripts, the unfavorable classifications vendors might fall into, and how MFM operates as a site of grace for vendors to transform their identities.

Scripts. In the previous sections, I discussed how vendors often double as storytellers and performers, relying on a flow of semi-captive audiences. Before I started conducting interviews, several vendors seized opportunities to give me their monologues. The interesting facet of this is not that they were talkative or prone to disclose personal information faster than the average person: rather, it is the fact that these encounters are habitual and cyclical. By this, I mean vendors are presented an opportunity to enact preferred dramatizations of themselves each time a customer enters their booth. This consistency does not mean these performances are any less authentic. However, these repeated presentations are frequent rituals that allow them to re-contextualize their own lives in a way that grants them agency over their self-image. With each new encounter comes another opportunity to either alter or solidify their own personal mythology.

Several vendors recounted an abridged version of their life story upon first meeting me as a customer. For instance, Daryl eagerly told me, a stranger, his entire life trajectory within minutes. I soon learned of the trials he underwent with his alcoholic ex-wife. This provided him an opportunity to rationalize his experience to me as well as himself. Following that, he spoke highly of his son, and how he went from a deadbeat to a successful activist that now instructs children on the spectrum at a private school in a high-income area, despite not having a single degree. Likewise, he narrated his own entrepreneurial journey from selling guitars, to eventually

owning a guitar shop, then finally landing at MFM selling guitars again.

A more performative vendor once told me, “This is just a hobby. I actually work for the US government where I do secret stuff and have to sign a bunch of non-disclosure agreements.” This instance of fibbery was a rarity, yet it still exemplifies how vendors use the steady flow of customers to save face and construct identities. Contrastingly, Beth, the trash-to-treasure artist, admitted to having a more persistent script: “My thing when they walk in, they look around because I do have some unusual things. I'll say yes, ‘Everything in here is hand-painted by me. Anything weird? That's me too.’ Everybody's got their little script. If you just sit here people you know, they're just gonna come in and go out.”

This example illustrates how a vendor can use this ritual to further solidify her persona, while also using that persona as a narrative persuasion technique to entice customers and garner a clientele. Likewise, for the artists at MFM, their booths function equally as a storefront and craft station. This means that customers walking into Beth’s booth witness her in the act of crafting, which serves as a performance as well. In the same sense, their curated booths act not as mere marketplaces, but as exhibits of the vendors’ private lives and consumption practices that also project a certain identity.

Site of Grace. The flea market acts as a site of grace for many kinds of people who would normally be considered outliers, but especially for collectors. This is partially because everyone is partaking in the same hobby as them, even if their interest is contained to the market. Each participant that expressed a non-profit motive for working a booth shared an intense desire to collect items of mass production. MFM is a space where that instinct is not only tolerated by others but endorsed. Andy described it as “a collector’s heaven.” Additionally, Daryl characterized the consequential mood as “upbeat, because everybody in here is kind of

exercising their collector feelings.” Typically, collecting items of mass production is discouraged if those items can be designated as rubbish, despite late capitalism’s tendency to promote excessive production and consumption. However, inside the market, these traits hold different values. No matter the cultural relevance or utility of an object, collecting of any kind is endearing. There is no distinction between a vendor collecting low-valued items according to their fixation and a vendor acquiring distinguished products. MFM is a zone free of judgment, where the taboo of certain forms of collecting, sometimes referred to as hoarding, is temporarily suspended and instead celebrated. Moreover, these taboos are suspended continuously enough for vendors to participate in language games that can alter their self-image and outward persona.

For instance, a vendor’s encyclopedic knowledge about their niche interests means little to most outside the market. Yet, inside their own booth, they become an expert collector by invoking their intimate familiarity with each of their items. In this manner, a hoarder might take on the role of a collector. A dumpster diver can reimagine themselves as a trash-to-treasure artist, or even better, a craftsman, depending on their performance. Likewise, a guitar merchant is allowed to rebrand himself as a performance instructor. Even without expertise or familiarity with their items, any vendor, due to their mere occupancy of a booth, implies to the public that they are making a profit. In consequence, they can rise to the highest of all American mythos and become an entrepreneur.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that MFM is an unsuspecting site of cultural exchange and identity maintenance. Additionally, the research here suggests that many vendors participate in the market for reasons beyond mere profit motives. However, these interests and gratifications were demonstrated to transcend social pleasantries. In turn, participants understood the space heterogeneously. Two broad research questions relating to space-conceptualization and consumption practices directed the focus of this study. Five themes were derived from the qualitative data collected. Each of these themes acts as an interpretive lens to aid the explanation of the presented research questions. The following sections detail how the identified themes connect to the research questions. Then, I discuss the implications of the study, directions for future research, and potential limitations of the work.

Conceptualizing Space (RQ1)

This study set out to understand how vendors conceptualize the flea market as a space. As result, participants overwhelmingly described the MFM as a secondarily economic space. For many, the space transcends its face value as a commercial arena. Despite the overt economic function of the market, MFM can be viewed as a quasi-third place. Herein, I will invoke the analyses of Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) to explicate the variant conceptualizations participants hold of the market. Namely, this comparison highlights the social contours of the market.

Wimmer (2013) succinctly summarizes Oldenburg and Brissett's (1982) prerequisites for a space to be deemed a third place. A third place must (a) be neutral and entail little obligation, (b) level rank and status, (c) primarily foster conversation, (d) be accessible and accommodable,

(e) contain regulars who set the mood; maintain a low profile, (f) generate a playful mood, (g) and serve as a home away from home, generating sincere comfort for some (Wimmer, 2013). Herein, I cross-examine relevant themes from the research with each essential quality of a third place. This evaluation displays how MFM constitutes a quasi-third place, but also that vendors are attracted to the space because of this quality.

The sub-theme ‘Autonomy’ best illustrates how the participants value the space for *entailing little obligation* (Wimmer, 2013). Many vendors choose to start a booth specifically at MFM because of the autonomy it allows. Their contracts are short and do not require vendors to attend their booths. Although the hours are predetermined, much of the vendors’ practices are free-willed. Thus, the lack of oversight and regulation is viewed as a positive attribute, wherein minimal obligation is considered a prerequisite for their willingness to work there. The focus on agency furthers a notion introduced in Sherry’s (1990a) work. Sherry (1990a) briefly mentioned that working-class proletarians become entrepreneurial capitalists within the market. This insight was under-stressed by Sherry (1990a). The work here emphasizes that this temporary class ascension is cherished by vendors that have otherwise committed their lives to working according to the interests of authorities. It is this lack of “purposive association” (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982, p. 271), where individuals are beholden to certain roles, that is liberating to vendors at the flea market.

MFM’s ability to *level rank and status* (Wimmer, 2013) is exemplified through the sub-theme, ‘Site of Grace.’ Regardless of their methods or specialty, vendors hold no rank over each other. Further, the larger theme of ‘Identity Maintenance’ displays how participants use the neutrality of the space to negotiate preexisting labels and social statuses. Much of this self-revision takes place with respect to self-image. Thus, MFM is an experiential landscape that

hosts tandem reconceptualization of space and self. Within MFM, a magpie can self-assign prestige and affirm esteem through customer and vendor interactions. This ambition to ascertain more prominent or, at least, ambiguous titles exemplifies Bourdieu's (1984) argument that attempts of reclassification entail participation in class distinction, which reproduces class struggles in the form of theatre. The act of assuming the role of an entrepreneur or artisan is an attempt to distinguish the self from titles associated with lower classes. In this sense, forms of distinction and identity maintenance reify capitalist norms and realize American mythos surrounding success and self-sufficiency. Thus, MFM may be a space absolved of rank but not status. Instead, the flea market is a place to negotiate status without the pressures of rank.

Of course, there are minor exceptions where rank and status still come into play. Namely, this anomalism is a product of the structural hierarchy of ownership. The board of trustees has dominion over the managerial staff, who have authority over the vendors and customers. As a result of this oversight, the few vendors that rent larger portions of the market and hire internal employees were reported to receive more attention and care from the managerial staff. This presence of rank means little day-to-day, due to the lack of managerial regulation. However, it emphasizes that MFM facilitates hyper-localized communities within the market. These neighborhoods exist together, yet independently. Consequently, certain neighborhoods display more attributes of a third place than others. This variation confirms Sherry's (1990a) insight that flea markets function as 'polylogues,' where the market can be understood and utilized divergently.

A third place must also *primarily cultivate conversation* (Wimmer, 2013). It is true that MFM hosts a variety of activities and exchanges. Still, dialogue is the most pervasive happening within the market. The theme 'The Primacy of People' best exhibits the omnipresence of

conversation. Specifically, the sub-theme ‘Social Utility’ explains how valued even idle chitchat is within the market.

The next two features of a third place can be addressed succinctly. A third place must *be accessible and contain regulars that establish a mood* (Wimmer, 2013). The accessibility of MFM is illustrated in the theme ‘Life After Labor,’ through the fact that some vendors work there partially because of their inability to be hired elsewhere (due to disabilities). It is also telling that people without homes often frequent the building. Truly, MFM is a public space.

It is self-evident that the vendors themselves constitute *regulars that set the mood* (Wimmer, 2013). It is their gregarious nature that underpins the experience of newcomers. However, the impermanence of the vendors problematizes the endurance of the habitat’s atmosphere. As vendors fully retire or otherwise fluctuate in and out of the store, the market’s mood is susceptible to change. Currently, the market is composed of vendors with long histories with the market. Still, the next generation of vendors may either be short-lived or less sociable. Nonetheless, the market also relies on regular customers to fill the space and set the mood. Even still, these regular customers are established clientele of the existing vendors. Amidst ongoing threats of a single vendor renting more booths (dominating more of the space) and the inevitable retirement of revered vendors, the mood of the market may prove to be as precarious as any other cultural phenomenon. For now, MFM hosts a network of vendors that sustain a lighthearted mood.

The last qualities of Oldenburg and Brissett’s (1982) third place theory, summarized by Wimmer (2013) require that *the space have a low profile, sustain a playful mood, and serve as a comforting home away from home*. The low profile of MFM has been implicitly addressed in the above section relating to rank and status. However, the sub-theme ‘Site of Grace’ further details

the modest character of the market. Essentially, MFM is devoid of pretension and welcoming to all, regardless of class or affiliation. Otherwise socially taboo behaviors are endorsed within the market. Further, the market is distinctly middle class, in terms of the income of the vendors and the types of items sold. Compared to antique stores, there is no social reward for financial ability or cultural sophistication. Most items peddled are relatively affordable and representative of lower classes. By this, I mean most products are items of mass production that some might refer to as kitsch or low-art. Additionally, any gap in knowledge relating to the items is viewed by the vendors as an opportunity to share cherished insights they might have with said items.

It is apparent in the above discussion on ‘regulars’ that the vendors and customers set not only a mood *but a playful mood* (Wimmer, 2013). Acts of teasing and energetic banter fill the auditory hum of the market. Indeed, it is this playful mood that allows vendors to reconceptualize themselves and partake in ‘Identity Maintenance.’ The ritual of reinvention is equally dependent on the market sufficing a *home away from home* (Wimmer, 2013). The familiarity provided by MFM grants vendors the comfort necessary to participate in free expression and thus live in accordance with their preferred self-image. Again, the sub-themes ‘Social Utility’ and ‘Site of Grace’ illuminate how participants conceptualize the space as a community gathering that facilitates a unique sense of attachment and belonging.

Considered altogether, it is apparent that most vendors conceptualize the space as a third place, to some degree or another. Yet, it is reductive to designate the space as a purely social arena. MFM is at once a third place, a performative venue of identity maintenance, a wavering storage unit, a museum of the past, a site of grace for hoarders, and a carnival. It is accurate to call the space festive or carnivalesque, considering the inversions of the symbolic order (rank/class), the embracement of the taboo (specifically hoarding), the commitment to free

expression, and the dissolution of distinctions between high and low culture (Bakhtin, 1984a). MFM is truly an ambivalent space. Yet, this liminality indicates the temperamental quality of third places.

However, MFM also demonstrates that third places and unique social realms of trade are susceptible to the proliferation of capital. As foreshadowed above, the healthy existence of a third place is only as permanent as the people that compose it. This notion challenges Within the current status quo, a space's existence is contingent upon its ability to produce a profit. Even if vendors do not care to make substantial profits, they still have to pay rent. At any point, the board of trustees that determine the market could decide to run MFM based on consignment. This decision would remove the vendors and leave items to be sold by managers alone. A profit-driven equation could potentially render the market devoid of the social dimension that entails the prosocial phenomena I have described. The only foreseeable solution to this looming threat is the construction of a flea market (or other third place) organized through mutual ownership. In this ideal scenario, the vendors would be granted more autonomy and a greater sense of collaboration. Still, considering the economic position of the vendors, this solution seems unlikely, without help, for this group of individuals.

Relationship Between Conceptualizations of Space and Merchandise (RQ2)

The flea market's ability to be conceptualized as a third place is entirely dependent on the items vendors choose to sell. For this reason, this study sought to analyze the relationship between conceptions of the market as a space and the merchandise sold within. The theme 'Personal Investment in Merchandise' illustrates how vendors attentively select and curate the items they sell. For those that host a booth for reasons excluding profit motives, the act of buying

and reselling is more important than the cash they reap. Indeed, I have provided examples that many vendors participate in the market to produce a flow of items that feed into their personal, albeit sometimes temporary, collection. Other vendors, who do not have a particular interest in a collection, buy for specific clientele. Beyond this, vendors enjoy encountering products with tangible connections to history. For these reasons, the products themselves are means-to-an-end that are likely to spur conversation.

The sub-theme ‘Micro Markets’ reveals that item-selection is often predated by relationships with customers. This method of curation is evidence that communal friendships are valued over mere profits. These instances rely on prior conversations with customers and challenge the typical dissemination of goods by introducing a dialogue that determines the selection of items. This method of selection is called ‘role shopping’ by consumer researchers, Arnold and Reynolds (2003). Role shopping describes a form of hedonic shopping motivation that derives pleasure from shopping for others, either out of duty, pleasure, or affection (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003). According to Arnold and Reynolds (2003), role shopping is an act of pleasure because acting out social responsibilities contributes to an “ego enhancement to their self-concepts” (p. 81). This approach is universal to all vendors, including the few that are primarily interested in profits. Here, the method supersedes motives, producing a prosocial outcome regardless of the intention. In these cases, specific items are requested by customers and thus fulfilled by vendors, who do so to make a buck. However, this norm still relies on a dialogue between consumer and producer. This research progresses Arnold and Reynolds’ (2003) description by connecting this hedonistic consumption motive to flea market vendors (rather than any consumer) and the impact these motives have on the items they select.

A minority of vendors conceptualized the space as a business and described their item

curation practices in a manner that confirms this self-report. It is no coincidence that the products they hosted stood out from the rest. These vendors reported no sentimental connection to the items in their booth. To them, they were mere opportunities for profit. This meant they bought items wholesale, often by the truckload. LaLone et al. (1993) described wholesalers as a distinct category of vendors. LaLone et al. (1993) noted a tension between other types of vendors and wholesalers, possibly as a “result of wholesalers' different motives and orientations, which are more profit-oriented and less socially motivated” (p. 4). Although the tension noted here was not apparent at MFM, the results show that wholesalers conceptualize the space and the items they sell differently than the majority of vendors.

Wholesalers are more likely to sell prepackaged (or repackaged) food, over-the-counter pharmaceuticals, and fast fashion (cheaply produced clothing). These vendors were also more likely to play into fads. For example, they sold more political paraphernalia relating to elections. In sum, vendors with profit motives cared less about upholding a niche, connecting with the past through items, or sharing personal knowledge about their products.

Contrastingly, those with non-profit motives cherished the ability to develop a niche, shown through the sub-theme, ‘Wheelhouse.’ It was common for these vendors to have intimate knowledge of the items in their booths and to show enthusiasm for sharing that familiarity. Crafters and artists develop a similar reputation. Both forms of participants used their specific interests to curate booths that appealed to them and sparked conversations with customers. Their booths resembled a natural extension of their homes, considering they collected the items out of fascination. Further, this commitment to their specialty allowed vendors to project the self-image of expert collector. Their process of selection is not beholden to the whims of market trends: rather, their curation reinforces their preexisting interests and acts as a mechanism of identity

negotiation.

Additionally, vendors that conceptualized the space as something that transcends the confines of a business understood the market as a museum of sorts. As I detailed in the sub-theme ‘Real People Past,’ these participants treated the mass-produced items that flood the market as more than discarded products. Instead, they are regarded as forgotten relics from the past. Belk (1988) explored how individuals project their self-image onto possessions, then use said items to negotiate value and construct personal narratives. Specifically, Belk (1988) identified how possessions convey a “sense of past” (p. 148). According to Belk (1988) possessions are often used as means to evoke memories, symbolize (often deceased) others, or articulate a nostalgia for some idealized or romanticized past. Similarly, Wong et al. (2012), building from Belk’s (1988) concept of the extended self, discuss how personal possessions act as anchors that help ground stable identity narratives.

Belk (1988) also noted individuals have a clear preference to extend their selves and negotiate pastness onto legitimate antiques or hand-crafted items. However, the research here demonstrates that participants are equally eager to incorporate, and thus extend their selves onto, items of mass production. Vendors at MFM are attracted to items (of any kind or economic value) that remind them of their own histories. Likewise, they use these items as storytelling devices to recount their connections to the past. In this sense, the products become opportunities to negotiate personal ideations, narratives, and mythologies. Further, the goods act as excuses to share their sentimental attachments with a hearkening community.

In sum, vendors’ curation practices follow their conceptualization of the space. In cases driven by a primacy of profits, the selection of goods is decided based on their success in sales. In all other cases, item selection is driven by familial relationships with customers, personal

fascinations, or sentimental understandings of the products. Each motive reveals how the participant perceives the space and its function. Further, every non-profit motive introduces a sense of collaboration in consumption. In this light, every product becomes an opportunity for sharing.

Implications

This study first illustrates that an economic presence does not exclude a space from being conceptualized and enacted upon as a third place. Further, the flea market, through vendors' attention to 'Micro Markets' and intimate relationships, serves as a model for fulfilling forms of economic exchange. MFM successfully manifests a bridge that reconnects consumers with producers, even after the initial production cycle. This return to small-scale economic production reintroduces the "interpersonal involvement" Oldenburg and Brissett (1982, p. 275) sought in third places. In short, MFM displays how the social can be inserted into modes of commerce, as Sherry (1990a, 1990b) suspected.

This work, through a focus on communicative phenomenon, naturally extends the preexisting consumer research on flea markets. Scholars like Sherry (1990a, 1990b), Maisel (1974), Petrescu and Bhatli (2013), and LaLone et al. (1992) identified that flea markets host a social realm or fulfill a social need. Instead, his study identifies specific social functions and investigates *how* social fulfillment is derived from the experiences within the market. This research investigates heterogeneous motives for participation and connects these motives to the phenomena of hoarding and identity maintenance. Likewise, this research connects these social benefits to a demographic of retirees that lack space to exist as social subjects.

Moreover, MFM indicates a method for individuals to cope with the dilemma of mass

production and consequent obsessions with collecting. This function is absent from any available literature on flea markets, including the works of Sherry (1990a, 1990b), Maisel (1974), and LaLone et al. (1993). Most importantly his research identified the flea market as a significant locus for identity negotiation. As a result, this study has also further emphasized the need for third places, as they are likely to be most palatable for free expression and subsequent identity maintenance.

Future Directions

The findings of this study have shown that certain flea markets might be conceptualized as third places. Future research might investigate other sites that could be conceptualized as third places, despite their economic functions. Likewise, researchers might consider how spaces could avoid this tension through mutual ownership. Other researchers might consider the work of Eisenstein (2021) and how flea markets might revitalize ancient gift economies. Additionally, researchers might benefit from studying flea markets as experiential landscapes, from a purely rhetorical standpoint, as Dickinson et al. (2006) have analyzed other public spaces. Aside from investigating tensions between the economic and the social, there is a need for more research into the pathology of collecting and hoarding from a communication perspective. Likewise, other ‘Sites of Grace’ for hoarders could be discovered and studied. Finally, future flea market research could investigate the process of ‘Identity Maintenance’ and rituals of “self-verification” (Swann, 2005, p. 1) more directly now that it has been identified.

Limitations

This study investigated a particular midwestern flea market. Although these findings are

not intended to be generalizable, the results were confined to the happenings within this specific market. A greater analysis of other midwestern flea markets could confirm or extend the analysis posited here. Further, the Midwest population has a reputation for being gregarious and middle class. Respectively, flea markets in other areas might have a different level of social interaction and kinds of products. Finally, although I interviewed a large sample of the vendors (and observed every vendor), it is possible that more naturally collaborative vendors participated in this study. This likelihood may have limited the ability to understand vendors with a profit motive.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I sought to understand how vendors at a midwestern flea market conceptualize the market as a space. Additionally, I explored the relationship between conceptions of the space and the products within particular booths. After conducting ethnographic observations, followed by semi-structured interviews, I analyzed the collected data and condensed that into five themes: ‘Life After Labor,’ ‘The Primacy of People,’ ‘Personal Investment in Merchandise,’ ‘Hoarding,’ and ‘Identity Maintenance.’ Each of these themes contributes to an understanding of how vendors conceptualize the space and its corresponding function. Therein, the non-profit motives that drive vendors to participate in the market proved to be unexpectedly multifaceted.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: IRB Approval



To:
Erin Wehrman
Communications

RE: Notice of IRB Approval
Submission Type: Initial
Study #: IRB-FY2022-378
Study Title: Conceptualizations of a Flea Market Space
Decision: Approved

Approval Date: January 13, 2022

This submission has been approved by the Missouri State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). You are required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented. Should any adverse event or unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others occur it must be reported immediately to the IRB.

This study was reviewed in accordance with federal regulations governing human subjects research, including those found at 45 CFR 46 (Common Rule), 45 CFR 164 (HIPAA), 21 CFR 50 & 56 (FDA), and 40 CFR 26 (EPA), where applicable.

Researchers Associated with this Project:
PI: Erin Wehrman
Co-PI:
Primary Contact: Tyler Curran
Other Investigators:

Appendix B: Demographics Questionnaire

1. Age: _____
2. Ethnicity: _____
3. Gender: _____
4. Political Affiliation: _____
5. Occupation: _____
6. How long have you lived in the [REDACTED] area? _____
7. How long have you operated a booth at the [REDACTED]? _____

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Hello, thank you for participating! We really appreciate you taking time out of your day to contribute to our research. Here is a quick overview of how this will go. First, I will ask you to describe your history at this particular flea market. Then, I am going to ask more specific questions about your interests and practices as a vendor. Of course, if you feel uncomfortable answering any question, you may skip it. Do you have any questions at this time? Are you ready to begin?

Interview Questions

History/Background:

1. How long have you had a booth here?
2. Why did you decide to open a booth?
3. What do you do throughout the week (while the market isn't open)?
4. Please describe a typical day for you at MFM.

Purpose/Fulfillment:

5. Why do you devote the time and energy to running your booth? What keeps you going?
6. What do you enjoy most about being a vendor?
7. What do you dislike about running a booth?

Product Relation:

8. Where do you find your products?
9. How familiar are you with the objects in this booth (currently)?
10. How do you price your items?
11. Do you feel you price your items fairly? Why or why not?

Consumer Relation:

12. What's it like to work with your customers?
13. How much do you talk to your customers?
 - a. Describe a relationship you have with one of your customers.
14. How well do you know your customers?
15. Do you ever barter/trade with customers?
 - a. What does that look like?
 - b. Can you provide a recent example of an interaction you experienced?

Other Vendors:

16. How familiar are you with the other booth-owners?
 - a. What kind of relationship do you have with the other vendors?
17. How often do you shop at other booths?
18. How do other vendors conduct business?
 - a. How does their approach differ from your own?
19. How would you describe the overall community of MFM?
 - a. How much do you rely on fellow vendors throughout your day?

Visions of the Space:

20. How would you describe the mood of MFM?
21. Are there ever disagreements about how the market should operate?
22. If it were up to you, what changes would you make to this place?
23. Is there anything else about your experience working as a vender that you would like me to know or think I should know about?