

“It might be rubbish, but it’s my rubbish”: How the Makers of Cigar Box Guitars Resist Throwaway Culture

ATKINSON, Paul <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6633-7242>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/27276/>

This document is the Published Version [VoR]

Citation:

ATKINSON, Paul (2020). “It might be rubbish, but it’s my rubbish”: How the Makers of Cigar Box Guitars Resist Throwaway Culture. *Journal of Sustainability Research*. [Article]

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

Article

“It Might Be Rubbish, but It’s *My* Rubbish”: How the Makers of Cigar Box Guitars Resist Throwaway Culture

Paul Atkinson

Art, Design & Media Research Centre, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield S1 1WB, UK; Email: p.atkinson@shu.ac.uk; Tel.: +44-114-225-6949

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses ethnographic research carried out into the activities of a particular group of makers whose DIY activities are centred on the creation, dissemination and performance of home-made musical instruments in the form of cigar box guitars. From a series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews, it emerged that these objects are almost exclusively based on notions of recycling, reuse and repurposing, and as such extend the life of component parts that would otherwise be discarded. Also, as hand-crafted labours of love, the resulting instruments are often the focus of strong emotional bonds to their makers, and are used for extended periods, being added to, altered and reconfigured over time as new components become available and the makers’ skills improve. For many makers, partaking in this activity has been their first foray into creative production of any kind, and often, they need to find solutions to problems they encounter in the process of making of their instruments. As a consequence of the usually very solitary nature of the activity, these makers make extensive use of online forums and networks to become part of a community of practice, openly sharing their knowledge and experience to help each other, and to celebrate their achievements of productive labour. It is argued that the “magic” of the instruments produced and the support of a social media network is directly linked to the extension of product lifetimes of the objects made.

KEYWORDS: DIY; amateur making; cigar box guitars; recycling; repurposing; extending product lifetimes

Open Access

Received: 06 July 2020

Accepted: 20 September 2020

Published: 15 October 2020

Copyright © 2020 by the author(s). Licensee Hapres, London, United Kingdom. This is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

INTRODUCTION: HISTORY, CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Cigar box guitars (and also diddly bows, cigar box fiddles, canjos, banjos and ukuleles—see Figure 1) are very simply constructed objects which historically have been created through the repurposing and upcycling of old wooden boxes or tins and other discarded objects, and the recycling of reclaimed materials. Originally these acoustic instruments appeared around the middle of the 19th Century in America as impoverished people built them out of necessity, but in the late 1990s the cigar box guitar reappeared as a reinvented, amplified instrument—

presented as a reactionary object driven by a desire for an alternative to mainstream consumption. Citing frustration with the excessive costs of some factory-produced instruments from mainstream companies and the unnecessary exploitation of precious, unsustainable hardwood resources the “Cigar Box Guitar Revolution” encouraged people to reclaim used materials, make themselves such instruments and to get out and perform with them in public. The scene rapidly grew and now cigar box guitar festivals are held across the whole of the United States. When the American blues player “Seasick Steve” appeared on BBC television in 2006, his promotion of these instruments initiated the cigar box guitar scene in the UK.



Figure 1. A selection of “cigar box guitars”, canjos and ukuleles constructed from cigar boxes, various other wooden boxes and tin cans made to commission by Spatchcock and Wurzell. Photo by the author.

The extended lifetime of cigar box guitars is clearly an issue of longevity rather than durability. As Cooper [1] explains:

A Product’s longevity describes its life-span (or “lifetime”) and is thus a somewhat different measure [to durability], being partly determined by factors other than attributes formed through design and manufacture. These factors include user behaviour towards a product and wider socio-cultural influences.

It is argued here that the behavioural relationship between the makers and their instruments and a number of specific socio-cultural influences are key elements in this resistance to mainstream consumption, making the production of cigar box guitars of particular interest to research in sustainability.

Anticonsumption is an established and well-explored area of academic study, usefully delimited by Makri et al. [2] who identified product life-extension and repurposing as particular areas worthy of further study.

Yet, from their extensive literature review, it appears that amateur making and do-it-yourself practices as methods of anticonsumption have not yet been fully explored. One study by Scott and Weaver [3] does discuss amateur making (and even includes cigar box guitars as an example). The article concentrates on repurposing objects to extend product lifespans. Cigar box guitars are an example of a process the authors label “amalgamative repurposing”:

Broadly speaking, repurposing can take three forms: functional repurposing, in which the object is not altered but used for a different purpose; aesthetic repurposing, in which the object is altered but the purpose is the same; and amalgamative repurposing, in which the object undergoes some sort of transformation to serve a different purpose. These three different forms of repurposing differ in the amount of skill, effort, and involvement they require, with amalgamative repurposing requiring the highest amount of skill and involvement.

The authors position repurposing as “an intersection of sustainable consumption and anticonsumption” and relevantly conclude that “creativity and fun may be a key motivation for repurposing and perhaps other sustainable consumption behaviors”.

Creativity and fun are key driving components of amateur making, and although craft practice itself has long been an area of academic study, the analysis of ethnographic studies with respect to amateur makers has only relatively recently become more established. One of the most cited authors researching in this respect is the historian Gelber, who since the early 1990s has produced a series of academic articles and books about the social aspects of DIY in the USA [4]. In 2000, Attfield’s seminal ethnographic work *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* highlighted the critical analysis of the work of amateur makers in the UK and the makers’ relationships with the objects they create as being worthy of serious academic attention [5]. I have previously addressed the diverse nature of amateur making activity and located it in relation to professional design practice [6], and in *The Design of Everyday Life*, Shove, Watson, Hand, and Ingram examine Do It Yourself making as the consumption of craft [7]. In his concluding chapter to the edited volume *Repair Work Ethnographies*, Jackson notes “the various kind of hacks, kludges and workarounds that support repair in amateur and enthusiast environments [8]. Another Jackson’s ethnographic studies have focused on two important aspects of amateur making; the motivation and rewards gained from its undertaking [9], and the role played by the locations in which such practices take place [10]. Gauntlett’s book *Making is Connecting*, assesses the impact of social media on the sharing of DIY knowledge [11]. Although not an ethnographic study, Knott’s *Amateur Craft: History and Theory* explores the important contribution amateur craft has made to the material culture of the modern world [12].

Why is the cigar box guitar such a strong contender as an object of sustainable consumption? What role does being part of a community of practice play in supporting sustainable aspirations? This study aims to answer these research questions and add to the bodies of knowledge described above by specifically exploring the ways in which the builders of these instruments, both individually and as a community, inherently resist throwaway culture.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Following a purposive sampling exercise (where each participant was asked to suggest other makers they were aware of), a series of eight semi-structured, in-depth interviews of between 45 minutes and one hour in length were conducted with builders of cigar box guitars, none of whom were professionally trained luthiers. All of the participants were, of course, offered confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms, but all of them requested to be referred to by the names they were known by within their cigar box guitar circles (which may or may not be their real names). The core questions asked of each participant were the same. These included questions about their backgrounds and training or qualifications, the length of time they had been producing cigar box guitars, and their motivations for doing so. Further questions explored the location where the making activity took place, where they sourced their raw materials, the particular processes they used in design and manufacture, the amount of time they spent each week making and whether for them it was a part-time or full-time activity.

All of the interviews were recorded using a voice recorder and were transcribed word for word into text files by a professional transcription service. The resulting textual material was coded manually by the author into a series of thematic points.

When analysed, some of this material informed an earlier research study by the author, which explored the creation of these instruments in the UK [13]. At a later date it was decided to create a short documentary film on the subject [14]. During the filming of this documentary, and later during the filming of an extended version commissioned for terrestrial television [15] (Figure 2), further semi-structured interviews employing the same set of questions were conducted with three of the participants in the original study and another twelve makers not involved in the original study that attended a cigar box guitar festival event which was filmed as part of the documentary. These filmed interviews were also transcribed word for word and manually coded. A list of the participants showing their age groups, the amount of time they have been involved in making cigar box guitars, whether they are part time or full-time makers and whether they were interviewed for the initial study or the documentary or both is shown below (Table 1). The participants, if not full time makers, had a variety of occupations including an actor, an IT consultant, two teachers, a ceramicist and warehouse worker. There was only one female

interviewed. This was not by choice, but because despite all efforts other female makers were not located. Taken along with the similarities of ages of those interviewed, this reinforced the initial view that this activity is largely dominated by middle-age men from a middle-class background.



Figure 2. A still from the BBC Television Documentary “Cigar Box Blues: The Makers of a Revolution”.

Table 1. Participants.

Interviewee	Age group	Involvement (Yrs)	PT/FT ¹	Initial study Interview	Documentary Film Interview
Nig	45–50	14	PT	✓	✓
Margaret	45–50	14	PT	✓	
Woofie	45–50	14	FT	✓	✓
Rob S	30–35	8	FT	✓	
Nick	55–60	6	PT	✓	
Chickenbone J	55–60	15	FT	✓	✓
Rob C	30–35	17	FT	✓	
Dan	50–55	3	PT	✓	
Hollowbelly	50–55	14	PT		✓
Den	50–55	8	PT		✓
Dusk Brother 1	30–35	4	PT		✓
Dusk Brother 2	30–35	4	PT		✓
Dirt Pie	60–65	10	FT		✓
Aiden	30–35	5	FT		✓
Andrew	55–60	5	PT		✓
Rick	25–30	7	PT		✓
Jeff	55–60	10	FT		✓
Greg	60–65	5	PT		✓
Black River	60–65	12	PT		✓
Bad Mood	45–50	12	PT		✓

¹ PT—Part Time makers produce CBGs as a hobby for themselves or sell them in low numbers. FT—Full Time makers have no other source of income other than from selling CBGs they have made.

Due to the nature of the filming process, a good deal of the filmed material was not used in the final edits of the documentaries. Analysis of that material is employed here for the first time to expand on the original finding that a key element for many UK makers is that wherever possible,

the materials used should be recycled, reused, repurposed or upcycled rather than bought, and to explore other, new, elements such as the strong emotional bonds created between the makers and their instruments.

Another important aspect, which was not fully explored in the original study, is the extent to which cigar box guitar makers make use of social media to develop their resistance to throwaway culture.

The makers all admit to making an extensive use of social media to counteract the feelings of isolation they experience while carrying out their making activities. Cigar box guitar makers evidently like to feel that they belong to a community of like-minded people—being part of virtual communities connected through social media as well as physical communities of people for whom meeting and playing their home-made instruments in public is a primary concern. In order to explore this further, a “netnographic” approach was taken to analyse makers’ online activity. Netnography is “a research methodology of ethnography adapted to the study of online communities” [16]. Analysing the content of internet-based activity allows insights into the drivers and motivations behind the behaviours of online communities.

The virtual communities studied here interface through well-established websites such as Cigar Box Nation, Hand Made Music Clubhouse, The Musical Instrument Makers Forum or Homemade-Guitars. Interviews revealed that the main go-to website for people joining the scene is Cigar Box Nation, the website set up in 1993 in the USA by Shane Speal, the founder of the “Cigar Box Guitar Revolution” [17] that boasts over 20,600 members. This site hosts instructional videos on making and playing, acts as a repository of downloadable plans, as an online store of parts and materials, and as a discussion forum for makers. Helpfully, the site counts the discussions that have accrued over the years under particular categories, with by far the most popular at the time of writing being “Building Secrets, Tips, Advice, Discussion” (5516 discussions) followed by “Performances, How to Play, Lessons, Concerts” (2101 discussions). By comparison, all the other discussion categories, including “For Sale: Cigar Box Guitars, other instruments, CDs and related items”, “Fests and Concerts: Organizing and Promoting” and “Other Stuff—off topic, fun stuff, whatever”, number only in the hundreds.

As well as the use of websites specifically aimed at cigar box guitar makers discussed above, general websites such as YouTube also play a huge role in encouraging the movement through the hosting of instructional demonstration videos as well as hosting libraries of cigar box guitar performances. However, reflecting changing online practices, the majority of online activity for the movement now occurs through Social Media including Twitter, Instagram and Facebook groups and pages including *Cigar Box Guitars*, *UK Cigar Box Guitars*, *Cigar Box Guitar Builders, Owners and Players*, *Cigar Box Guitar History*, and *DIY Cigar Box Guitars* among many others. A table showing 25 of these Facebook pages, when they were founded and the number of members each has is

informative (Table 2). It shows that the popularity of the cigar box guitar has been fairly consistent, with, on average, two new cigar box guitar related pages being founded each year over the last 12 years. However, the average number of members per group, at 6261, is a meaningless figure. The number of members varies wildly, with 4 groups having over 10,000 members (one group having over 55,000, another with over 36,000), but the majority of sites having far fewer: 10 groups have fewer than 1000 members and 11 groups have between 1000 and 10,000 members. In addition, most members of a particular group are also a member of one or more other groups, as can be seen by the same posts appearing on a number of different CBG Facebook pages. By far the most popular type of group is “Builds/Playing” (9 groups) where the focus is on general building tips, and showing and playing finished builds. This is followed by “Playing Tuition’ groups, where general lessons and “how to play” tutorials are provided. Two groups are store sites, and the other types are a mixture of store, building tuition, exchange and community groups.

Table 2. Facebook CBG groups founded as of 18 June 2020 ¹.

Date Founded	Name	Group Type	Members
17 Jun 2009	Cigar Box Nation	Community/Store	55,028
02 Sep 2010	C.B. Gitty Crafter Supply	Store	14,818
09 Jun 2011	Chickenbone John’s Guitars	Store/Build tuition	2840
23 Jun 2012	Cigar Box Guitar	Builds/Playing	11,106
27 Feb 2013	European Cigar Box Guitar Fans	Builds/Playing	838
12 Nov 2013	Cigar Box Guitar Builders, Owners and Players	Builds/Playing	4767
01 Dec 2013	Cigar Box Guitar Videos and Music	Playing only	1673
12 Mar 2014	Homemade Stringed Instruments	Builds/Playing	6494
09 Apr 2014	U.K. Cigar Box Guitars	Builds/Playing	1206
09 Apr 2015	The Original Cigar Box Guitar Store	For sale/Exchange	2908
16 Jun 2015	Cigar Box Guitar Yorkshire	Playing Tuition	160
07 Dec 2015	U.K. Cigar box guitar songs	Playing only	304
16 Nov 2016	The Cigar Box Guitar Builder	Builds/Playing	602
20 Nov 2016	Cigar Box Guitar Builders	Builds only	905
12 Jan 2017	How To Play Cigar Box Guitar	Playing Tuition	2975
04 Jul 2017	Cigar Box Guitars	Builds/Playing	6103
01 Nov 2017	Uncle Mark Cigar Box Wizard	Playing Tuition	1923
01 Feb 2018	DIY Cigar Box Guitars	Builds/Playing	36,123
28 Apr 2018	Mainely CBG’s	Store	697
08 May 2018	Cigar Box Guitar History	Community	1792
26 Sep 2018	Cigar Box Guitar Music and Videos	Playing only	571
06 May 2019	Friends of C. B. Gitty	Build tuition	1022
20 Nov 2019	5-Day CBG Challenge	Playing Tuition	608
02 Jan 2020	cigar box guitar enthusiasts	Builds/Playing	612
18 Jan 2020	Learn Cigar Box Guitar group	Playing Tuition	448

¹ This is not a comprehensive list, but based on a single search for “cigar box guitars” within Facebook’s standard settings for language/geographical region. Individual Facebook member pages using the term in their title are not included.

IT MIGHT BE RUBBISH, BUT IT'S MY RUBBISH

The actual construction of cigar box guitars obviously varies a great deal depending on the particular materials and components selected, but usually begins by identifying a suitable receptacle that could form a resonating chamber or soundbox. This could be any hollow wooden box (hence the common use made of old cigar boxes), a tin box or empty can, or a chamber made from domed metal items such as old car hub caps. The receptacle is then cut to allow a wooden neck to be fitted through it, which can be formed from any suitably strong piece of wood sawn and shaped to size, prompting the use of reclaimed floorboards or doorframes, or offcuts of wood left over from other projects. The design and cutting of these two main components is rarely planned out beforehand in any great detail, with most of the assembly being done “under the saw” as the instrument is being made. Sometimes the instruments are purely acoustic, in which case sound holes need to be cut into the box to increase the volume. More usually the guitars are amplified by the inclusion of a piezo-type flat disc transducer pickup glued to the inside of the box, or an electromagnetic pickup (bought, reused, or sometimes wound by hand by the builder) fitted to the top of the box or tin underneath where the strings will be fitted. Although the use of an electromagnetic pickup potentially removes the need for a hollow body, solid-bodied “cigar box” guitars are quite rare. The final components required can be bought or made from a variety of found objects (usually a mix of the two)—a tailpiece for the strings, a bridge and nut to support the strings above the body and neck of the guitar, and some kind of tuning device to tension the strings and tune them to the correct note.

One of the most high-profile and active proponents of cigar box guitars in the UK is Chickenbone John, who pronounces himself to be “The Godfather of the cigar box guitar”. He gave up a career as an architect when during a recession he found himself making more money from selling his home-made instruments than he was from his professional practice. Chickenbone John explains the driving force to use recycled materials and not worry too much about trying to achieve perfection. He says:

Making a “proper” guitar takes a lot of time, but making a cigar box guitar is just a stick in a box and you can make it as simple or fancy as you want. It doesn't have to be perfect, as long as it can be played, that's all that matters. It's a revelation to think that with the tools in your garage and a bit of scrap wood, you can make an instrument. As I learned to make these I taught other people. It's fantastic to see the delight on someone's face when they screw an instrument together in a day and play it. It's the DIY not EMI thing, which the punk days had had, where you could make your own record. That ethos had fallen away with synthesisers and very highly produced music. So it was a real innovation for people to think “I'll make my own instrument and

do what I want”, and “yes, it might be rubbish, but it’s my rubbish” not some mass-produced piece of stuff.

Other makers also express the view that there is indeed a level of kudos and authenticity to be found in using second-hand components, repurposing and upcycling parts and reclaiming and recycling wood wherever possible as opposed to buying anything new. Robyn Grieg-Brown of “Spatchcock and Wurzell” states:

For the last seven or eight years now I’ve been making stringed instruments from recycled materials. Everything has to be recycled or reclaimed. Tins, old tins, vintage tins and reclaimed hardwood furniture. People give me tins, save me tins, from car boot sales, house clearances. I’m known as a “tin man” at the local car boot sale! So, I’d find a tin or be given a tin, and it would tell me what it wants to be—whether a guitar, a ukulele or a banjo. And then I’d go look for a piece of hardwood. Being a Yorkshireman I can’t throw anything away. I go to the local recycling place, look in the skip and think “why has someone thrown that away? That’s just a perfectly usable piece of kit.” So, making stuff from what—I’m like a Womble basically—people throw away is just, incredible. I mean, this is a nice piece of mahogany which as you can see has butts in there—it was a door frame originally.

While all makers revel in the recycling, repurposing and re-use aspects of their making, the most overtly ecological approach is exemplified in the work of one maker, Jeff, based in Cornwall on the south-west coast of the UK. A keen surfer and professional surfboard maker, he started his company “Dirtbox Guitars” to further his passion of sustainable crafting. Like many makers, all his guitars are made from recycled materials, but sustainable issues are central to his personal beliefs and pervade all his discussions around making. Jeff is an environmental activist, and is involved in keeping the local beaches clean and educating visitors to clear up and take their rubbish home. As a result, people who find objects on the beach take them to him as they know he will reuse it. He has even made someone a one-string diddly bow from an old speargun they found on the beach.

As some of the makers note, there is no real imperative today to use recycled materials and upcycled components. Factory-produced instruments are now so readily available at such a range of price points it is likely that most people could afford to buy one if they so desired. Even in making their own instruments, makers have access to mass-produced components through music stores or online stores such as Ebay, and new power tools and virgin timber from DIY stores if they so choose. The fact remains, though, that the overarching ethos of the movement is to resist such consumerism wherever possible. Many of the makers revel in the fact that they use no power tools at all, only pre-owned, often handed-down, hand tools; and the purchasing of virgin timber is not encouraged. Once

involved in this process of recycling and repurposing rather than purchasing, it can become second nature and seemingly the source of much of the enjoyment. Some of the makers comment that they soon started to pay far more attention to what they were buying and more closely consider where it came from, and started to look instead at all kinds of diverse objects they came across in a different way, seeing the possibilities of how they could be employed as a part of various instruments (“I could make a ukulele out of that” or “That could be turned into a banjo”). Such an approach has been responsible for a number of wildly eccentric stringed instruments made from unlikely objects—from old garden shovels to steel dog bowls, toolboxes, old metal washboards and even the “crapocaster”, made from an old toilet seat.

THIS IS A PART OF ME

There is also a clear element of pride in what the makers of cigar box guitars produce that contributes to extended product lifetimes—a connection between the maker and the instrument itself which enhances its value to them. As one of the makers, Nig Richards, says when describing one of his guitars:

This is part of me. I mean, it's come out of my head and out of my endeavours. It doesn't exist anywhere else before I've got these little bits of scrap wood together and made it. I know it sounds weird but there's an emotional attachment there. This for me is still the bits and pieces that I found to put this together. And then when I play the music and the sound comes out—it's like—that's part of me. That's the sound that I want and I've made that. I'm not just playing it, I've made the instrument that it's coming out of. I don't know if anybody who hasn't made one can understand what that means—I hope they can. That's what you feel. It really is an extension of yourself. The sound appears and you think “Wow! You know, that's me. That really is me, because this doesn't exist if I hadn't have made it” This is my music coming out of 5 dollars' worth of cardboard and wire.

“Hollowbelly” is more interested in playing cigar box guitars than making them, but nevertheless has a strong connection to the instruments that he has acquired over the years, stemming from seeing himself as part of a strong community. Brandishing a guitar he has been sent by a fan of his music, he says:

It's great to be part of a community. The idea that somebody I'll never meet in Pennsylvania would make and send over this guitar is touching, isn't it? There's an irony in the fact I had a £1000 National guitar, but I found the sound I was looking for from a stick, shoved in a box! It's not about throwing money at something, that's not where you'll find the magic, but I had to find out the hard way.

Iain Moncrieff of “The Dusk Brothers” reiterates the point about the “magic” involved in making and playing a cigar box guitar that he says doesn’t occur with mass produced instruments:

You never know how they’re going to sound. You spend, (turns to his brother Graeme Moncrieff) you spend about four or five months making yours! Mine take about a week I reckon. And then you string them up, and you don’t know that whole time what they’re going to sound like. And you string them up and you hit the first chord and you get this sound which is unlike any other guitar that you’ve ever played. And, I don’t know, it’s quite magical really. It’s magical to make something and then play it and it makes this sound which is just, different.

One noticeable aspect of performing with cigar box guitars is the large proportion of artists that post on the internet under a pseudonym, and use a performance name or stage name when playing live. While this might not be restricted to the world of cigar box guitars, the adoption of a performance name does seem to strike a common chord with players of cigar box guitars. Perhaps this is following in the tradition of earlier American blues players such as “Leadbelly”, “Peg Leg Howell”, “Blind Lemon Jefferson” or “Scrapper Blackwell”; but likely it is also related to the “alternative” image of the instrument and the air of resistance that surrounds the movement. In the same way that playing a cigar box guitar allows makers to discover a particular aspect of their musical creativity they may not have previously explored, performing under a different name certainly allows players to easily step outside of their everyday existence, to experiment with an alternative persona, or to freely express their inner feelings, strengthening their emotional ties to their hand-made guitars. As Hollowbelly says:

I’m not acting it when I do it. I play like I’m going to get killed the moment I come offstage—as if it’s the very last thing I’m going to do. That’s why it sounds the way it does—because that’s what’s in me!

Such emotional bonds between the players and their instruments seem to be key to preventing the object being discarded at a later date. Many makers report that they frequently re-make the same instrument a number of times, making changes to it if the sound wasn’t quite what they were looking for, adding sound holes, or extra pickups to increase a guitar’s versatility, or changing the appearance of the guitar by painting the body or applying different finishes including waxes, oils or even boot polish. The reworking of an instrument in this way serves only to further develop existing emotional bonds. In this way, makers proactively extend the product lifetime of the component parts they select, and through constant upkeep, repair, alteration and additions to their instruments as they gain experience, they extend the product lifetime of the instruments they create.

ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Scrutiny of the online behaviours of cigar box guitar enthusiasts was achieved through a simple “netnographic” analysis of the different types of postings within the Facebook groups listed above. This provided an insight into the ways in which members connect with each other, promote participation and transfer knowledge on an open basis. For the purposes of this exercise, an analysis of 50 randomly selected posts were coded and fell within five basic types. These are listed below with a few examples given of typical posts within each group.

Self-promotional posts-Making:

- Look at this cigar box guitar I’ve just made/have for sale
- I’ve found these cigar boxes/components I’m going to use
- Advertising cigar box guitars/components for sale

Self-promotional posts - Playing:

- Video of me playing my latest cigar box guitar at home/on stage
- Download my latest tracks here/links to YouTube videos
- Advertising CD’s for sale

Calls for help:

- I’ve got a problem making this cigar box guitar—can anyone suggest solutions?
- I want to use nails as frets—what problems am I likely to have?
- What’s the best position for this particular pickup?

Instructional posts/videos:

- This is how to make a cigar box guitar/ solve a problem/downloadable plans
- Reviews of related equipment, tools, pedals or amplifiers
- How to play “Spirit in the Sky” on a cigar box guitar

Promotional posts:

- Advertising Cigar box guitar-based performances/festivals/trade shows
- Sharing “found” posts/videos of players, instruments etc.
- General promotion of the scene—cartoons, old photos etc.

To see if there was a pattern to the distribution of these different types of posts a sample of four Facebook groups was chosen, and the posts over a period of one month (May 2019) were analysed. The deliberately diverse groups (in terms of number of members and activity levels (posts per day)) chosen were *Cigar Box Guitar*; *Cigar Box Guitar Builders, Owners and Players*; *UK Cigar Box Guitars* and the community group *Cigar Box Nation*.

The results (Table 3), particularly when graphed (Figure 3), show a remarkable similarity of distribution, despite the markedly different number of actual posts. When averaged out, by far the largest number of posts are self-promotional posts where people take the opportunity to

display their making skills, followed by posts where people demonstrate their playing skills, which follows exactly the most popular discussions on the *Cigar Box Nation* website as mentioned above, showing a continuation of the dominance of these two topics. There is some crossover between these two types of posts, as very often, the people demonstrating their playing ability are simultaneously demonstrating the sound of an instrument that they have made. The next most common post types are more altruistic, promoting the cigar box guitar scene in general terms, advertising festivals or sharing historical photographs of cigar box guitars or related images. Next come calls for help, with less experienced members hoping for a solution from more experienced members, and finally come instructional posts, with members demonstrating how to perform certain making tasks, or providing lessons on how to play particular tunes, or uploading demonstrations and reviews of related equipment such as guitar amplifiers. Some crossover between all these results occurs, as the same posts are very often submitted to a number of different Facebook pages, so the entries are not unique to that page or group.

Table 3. Distribution of post types.

Facebook Groups	SP Making	SP Playing	Promotion	Calls for Help	Instruction
Cigar Box Guitar	260	139	70	24	28
CBG Builders, Owners & Players	211	104	47	43	16
UK Cigar Box Guitars	65	26	15	8	13
Cigar Box Nation	17	13	6	0	15
Average	140.75	70.5	34.5	18.75	18

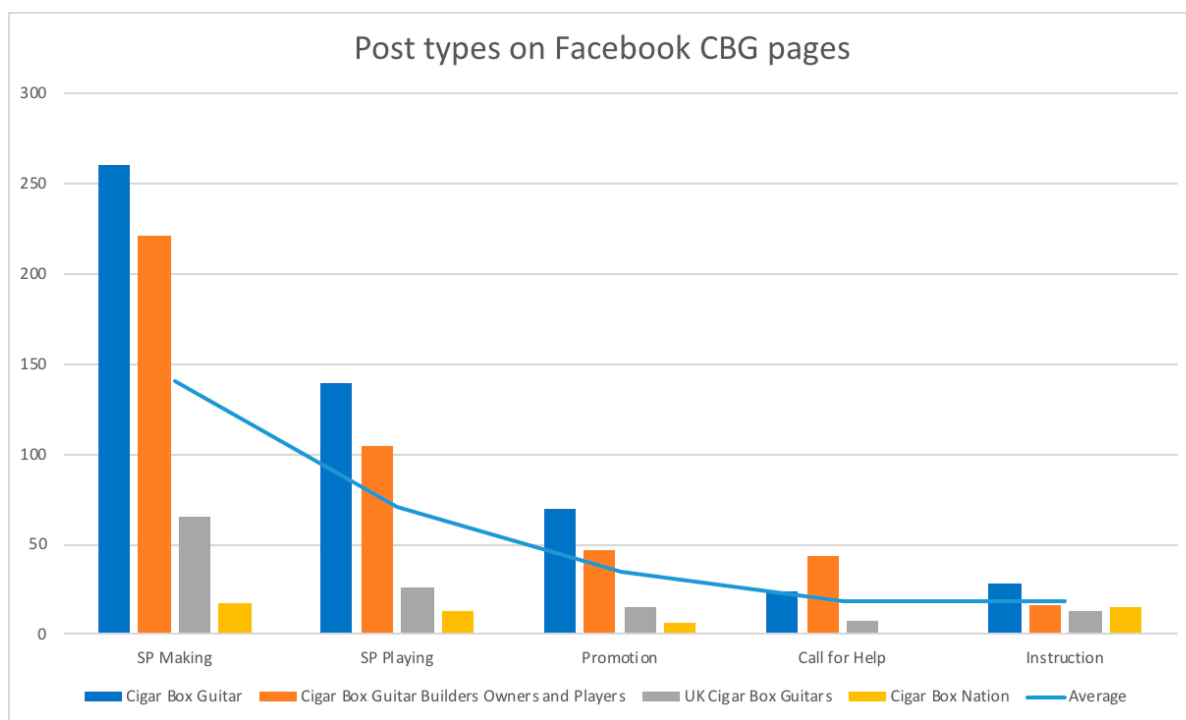


Figure 3. Graph of distribution of post types.

The makers' resistance to throwaway culture is further evidenced through many of the positive comments written in response to the post types described above (in particular the self-promotional posts around making and calls for help). Here the kudos arising from sustainable making activity is most pronounced. Makers are applauded for their creative ideas and innovative re-use of discarded or found objects, such as drawer handle pulls and door hinges for tailpieces to hold the ends of strings; control knobs made out of cork and old bottle tops, or turned from pieces of pipe and old coins; bridges made from old keys, threaded bolts or carved out of old bone; sound-hole covers made from old sink strainers, computer fan grilles or shower curtain eyelets; and frets made from nails, baling wire or even plastic tie-wraps. The comments frequently evidence the free dissemination and ready take up of such repurposing suggestions through comments along the lines of 'I'm going to use that idea', or "Thanks for that—can't wait to try it". Where people have resorted to buying new items or tools out of desperation, the responses usually include suggestions of more sustainable sources of pre-owned or discarded alternatives. This attitude does not appear to be regarded as parsimonious in any way by the community; rather it appears to be regarded as a healthy, positive and forward-looking attitude.

Makers demonstrate awareness of the fact that while they all take a "back to basics" approach to building and push the idea of "authenticity" in the pieces they produce, they also wholeheartedly embrace the use of the internet to make and maintain their connections to online communities of makers. Chickenbone John says that "if it wasn't for the internet, it would just be happening in the dusty back room of a pub somewhere", while Nig stated:

Interestingly, the whole new movement of people making—not just cigar box and biscuit tin guitars but all kinds of handmade instruments—is dependent on the use of social media and modern technology because without it, it wouldn't have mushroomed the way that is has. I mean, I've been in contact and part of a movement with people who literally are all around the globe. And so we're in touch with each other and we feel part of this thing, so without the modern technology, we wouldn't be able to do it, but it's a kind of strange almost dichotomous relationship we've got really between going back to low-tech musical instrument making but using the latest in high-tech social media technology to actually grow and keep the movement rolling.

DISCUSSION

There are a couple of interesting ironic elements surrounding the activity of making cigar box guitars. One is that, as shown, its proponents widely identify as being against mainstream consumption, and even as strongly anticonsumerist. Indeed, a few comments on online forums rail

against those who have had the audacity to make a full-time living from making these instruments, seeing it as being against the “rebel” authenticity of the movement (however misplaced this notion of authenticity may be). For the vast majority of makers, though, there is no shame at all in selling the outputs of their endeavours for profit. If cigar box guitars are taken as an example of craft practice, the selling of creative output is, often, a normal part of that practice. Cigar box guitars are more accurately, though, examples of DIY and amateur making practices, wherein the expectation and pursuit of profit is not usually an expected result of the activity. Secondly, as a number of the makers hint, the reason for the popularity of the hand building of such basic instruments as cigar box guitars in an age when high-quality factory-built instruments are readily accessible appears to reside in an active resistance against the homogenizing and unsustainable nature of global capitalism and the passive acceptance of digital culture. However, the makers are very aware of the irony in the fact that it is the digital technology of social media which has lowered barriers to participation in the pastime and spread the necessary knowledge to enable their construction by amateur makers all around the world.

The preceding sections describe the findings around three intertwined themes that together explain the sustainable aspects of the cigar box making phenomenon, those themes being: the practice of recycling and repurposing; the emotional bonds between makers and their instruments; and the participation in online and physical communities of practice.

The cigar box guitar is such a strong contender as an object of sustainable consumption because the majority of makers learned how to build instruments through active participation in web-based communities and Facebook groups. Following the examples of others, makers reported an enhanced sense of achievement when they had managed to create an instrument without buying anything new to do so. Chance findings of suitable pieces of timber and the imaginative repurposing of items that would have been discarded are an intrinsic part of the activity, and also a source of pride amongst makers, with the results shared through social media. That element of pride in the results of their creative endeavours is a key component in extending the product lifespan as the makers retain their instruments for long periods, allowing them to develop their musical repertoires, gradually adapting and customising the instruments to perfectly suit their playing styles and reflect their self-identities. Once inculcated into the making and playing practices, those personal developments are in turn shared via social media with other makers, experienced and inexperienced alike, growing and developing the movement. In this way, being a part of the communities of practice plays an active role in supporting sustainable aspirations.

The sense of connectedness achieved through active participation in online communities, as well as the real life communities of practice and of performance is a hugely important part of the world of the cigar box guitar

maker. The main impact of these communities on the makers is to move their practice away from being purely a Do-It-Yourself activity into one of Do-It-Together or Do-It-With-Others, even if the participation is purely on the level of knowledge exchange rather than hands-on construction. In doing so, increasing numbers of people are becoming involved in a creative activity (many for the first time) where they realise they have the ability to make decisions and choices about what materials to use (and reuse) and the freedom to use any found objects and upcycled parts to create unique products with which they develop an incredibly strong emotional bond.

This study adds to the existing literature discussed above in increasing the understanding of anticonsumption practices, adding a case study that exemplifies the wider socio-cultural influences that act to extend product lifetimes. While the role of social media in the sharing of DIY knowledge has been previously explored, the role of social media in providing a focused network of support for both making and performing around a single object has not.

CONCLUSIONS

For many of those involved, the making of cigar box guitars has unleashed previously hidden or unrealised skills and unexplored levels of creativity, which have acted to develop their personal horizons in various ways. Many of the makers state that this personal development has changed their whole lives, not only from adopting more sustainable approaches resulting in a more emotionally rewarding lifestyle, but also in allowing the making and selling of homemade instruments to become their main or only source of income. For some, this had saved the day when faced with redundancy, for others it had been a welcome distraction that allowed them to escape the drudgery of monotonous or repetitive work. In a similar way, for those that make instruments primarily for performing with in public, adopting homemade instruments has allowed them to expand their repertoires in new ways and to explore new avenues in their music making and song writing. Frequently, as can be seen from the blues-inspired performance names adopted by many of the players, the instruments have become part of an alter-ego they adopt on stage, and as such make a contribution to their self-identity. As a result, the instruments they have created have become of huge importance to their musical development and playing careers, with more than one participant stating that they felt they could never go back to their previous unsustainable consumption of factory-produced musical instruments.

The above analysis shows that there are three aspects that act to strengthen the desire for makers of cigar box guitars to resist throwaway culture. Firstly, having an object or a range of artefacts that have not only their own use value (in Marxist terms) but also a personal, emotional value about which the maker can feel passionate, can act as a focus of makers' good intentions with respect to sustainable consumption, recycling,

repurposing and upcycling. Such objects provide a strong incentive to carry out making as an active form of resistance. Secondly, the unique nature of the instruments from a sonic perspective, as well as an individual tactile and visual perspective, means that cigar box guitars enable personal growth and development as a musical performer in a way that other instruments do not. Thirdly, as the netnographic analysis revealed, being a part of active virtual and physical support networks provides the necessary learning experiences, information, advice and positive emotional support and encouragement for makers striving to develop their skills in order to operate in a sustainable and more emotionally rewarding way. Without the support of such virtual and physical communities, makers might find continually striving to achieve the extension of product lifespans far more onerous.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

The supplementary material is available online at <https://doi.org/10.20900/jsr20200038>.

DATA AVAILABILITY

All data generated from the study are available in the manuscript or supplementary files.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

FUNDING

This research was funded by the Art, Design & Media Research Centre, Sheffield Hallam University.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all the participants in this study, who gave their time to be interviewed and filmed for this research, and the anonymous referees of this submission for their helpful comments and suggestions. Some elements of this article were presented at the PLATE 2019 conference: Atkinson, P. Cigar Box Guitar Forums: Fostering competency, creativity and connectedness in communities of practice and performance. 3rd PLATE Conference, Berlin, Germany, 18th–20th Sept 2019. ISBN 978-3-7983-3124-2 (print), ISBN 978-3-7983-3125-9 (online).

REFERENCES

1. Cooper T. The Significance of Product Longevity. In: Cooper T, editor. *Longer Lasting Products: Alternatives to the Throwaway Society*. Abingdon (UK): Routledge; 2016. p. 3-38.

2. Makri K, Schlegelmilch BB, Mai R, Dinhof K. What we know about anticonsumption: An attempt to nail jelly to the wall. *Psychol Market.* 2020;37(2):177-215. doi: 10.1002/mar.21319
3. Scott KA, Weaver ST. The Intersection of Sustainable Consumption and Anticonsumption: Repurposing to Extend Product Life Spans. *J Public Policy Market.* 2018;37(2):291-305. doi: 10.1177/0743915618811851
4. Gelber SM. *Hobbies: Leisure and the Culture of Work in America.* New York (NY, US): Columbia University Press; 1999.
5. Attfield J. *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life.* London (UK): Berg; 2000.
6. Atkinson P. Do It Yourself: Democracy and Design. *J Design History.* 2006;19(1):1-10. doi: 10.1093/jdh/epk001
7. Shove E, Watson M, Hand M, Ingram J. *The Design of Everyday Life.* Oxford (UK): Berg; 2007.
8. Jackson S. Repair as Transition: Tim, Materiality and Hope. In: Strelbel I, Bovet A, Sormani P, editors. *Repair Work Ethnographies: Revisiting Breakdown, Relocating Materiality.* New York (NY, US): Springer; 2018.
9. Jackson A. Men Who Make—The “Flow” of the Amateur Designer/Maker. In: Buszek M, editor. *Extra/Ordinary: Craft Culture and Contemporary Art.* North Carolina (NC, US): Duke University Press; 2011.
10. Jackson A. Understanding the Home Workshop: Project Space, Project Time, and Material Interaction. *Interiors Design Architecture Culture.* 2013;4(2):175-94. doi: 10.2752/204191213X13693260150380
11. Gauntlett D. *Making is Connecting: The social meaning of creativity, from DIY and knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0.* Cambridge (UK): Polity Press; 2011.
12. Knott S. *Amateur Craft, History and Theory.* London (UK): Bloomsbury; 2015.
13. Atkinson P. Hairy Guys in Sheds: The Rough and Ready World of DIY Cigar Box Guitar Makers. *Design Culture.* 2018;10(3):139-68. doi: 10.1080/17547075.2018.1467724
14. Heath V, Atkinson P. *Three Chords and the Truth.* Documentary Short (22 min); 2019.
15. Heath V, Atkinson P. *Cigar Box Blues—The Makers of a Revolution.* Documentary (29 min) Initial broadcast 16 December 2019, BBC1 West Midlands.
16. Kozinets RV. The Field Behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities. *J Market Res.* 2002;39(February):61-72. doi: 10.1509/jmkr.39.1.61.18935
17. Speal S. *Making Poor Man’s Guitars.* Mount Joy (US): Fox Chapel Publishing; 2018.

How to cite this article:

Atkinson P. “It Might Be Rubbish, but It’s *My* Rubbish”: How the Makers of Cigar Box Guitars Resist Throwaway Culture. *J Sustain Res.* 2020;2(4):e200038. <https://doi.org/10.20900/jsr20200038>