

7 Online Message Boards

In the previous chapters, we have discussed personal, musical and social motives for musicians to spend time, money and thought on equipment. Many of the personal and musical reasons were partly of social nature. In popular music, it shows in musicians generally performing together with other musicians, so it is to be expected that playing and dealing with instruments reflects social order. This chapter extends the previous survey and the theoretical considerations on GAS by shifting the focus from individual musicians to special-interest communities meeting on online message boards. These forums can be understood as ‘Communities of Practice’ as introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991) and refined by Wenger (1998). Wenger (1998: 45) explains these communities of practice as follows:

Being alive as human beings means that we are constantly engaged in the pursuit of enterprises of all kinds ... As we define these enterprises and engage in their pursuit together, we interact with each other and with the world and we tune our relations with each other and with the world accordingly. In other words, we learn. Over time, this collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise.

As per Wenger (1998: 47), any practice is a social practice, characterised by both explicit and tacit elements that are expressed through language, images, symbols, codified procedures, untold rules of thumb and shared world views, most of which are never openly articulated.

Communities of practice are defined by three dimensions (Wenger 1998: 73–83). *Mutual engagement* refers to the nature of the community and the relationship of its participants. Although not everybody needs to know the entire community, a member is expected to understand the group’s unwritten rules and knowledge. This does not mean that communities are homogenous; on the contrary, ‘conflict and misery can even constitute the core characteristic of a shared practice’ (Wenger 1998: 77). Nevertheless, the norms, whether accepted or disputed, are vital for the community. Communities of practice are further established through a *joint enterprise*, the shared practice of its members. In other words, the community results from the collective practices and the negotiation thereof. These practices do not exist in isolation, as they overlap with other communities of practice, and besides, collective practices are situated in broader historical, social, cultural and institutional contexts. *Shared repertoire* is the resources created in collaborative practice that define meaning. Such resources include routines, stories, gestures, practices and symbols that shape the ‘discourse by which members create meaningful statements about the world, as

well as the styles by which they express their forms of membership and their identities as members' (Wenger 1998: 83). Indicators of communities of practice are engaging in doing things together, sharing information in a rapid flow without any introductory preambles, quickly setting up a problem to be discussed, knowing what others know, local lore, shared stories and inside jokes, jargon and other shortcuts to communication (Wenger 1998: 125f).

The concept of communities of practice was developed based on physical communities but later adapted to online settings commonly referred to as 'Virtual Communities of Practice' (Dubé et al. 2005; Hara et al. 2009; Von Wartburg et al. 2006). In these communities, less experienced members learn from interaction with more experienced members, not only explicit knowledge but also the tacit knowledge that keeps these communities alive. In message boards, the level of expertise is often expressed in 'ranks' depending on the number of posts written and the assumed influence exercised on others. Kozinets (1999) has observed a hierarchy from *tourists*, *minglers*, *devotees* to *insiders*, with devotees and insiders welcoming newcomers, passing on the community norms and shaping the negotiation of meaning.

Online forums for musicians meet all the requirements of offline and online communities of practice because they are organised around the common interests of community members but, as a rule, are not working toward achieving specific performance goals (Ardichvili 2008: 542). The shared practice is to make music. Although the community members do not play together, their discourse acts as a proxy for their music, which is more than just playing and encompasses an entire system of meanings, practices and interests. Two of the main interests are playing and equipment, which is often reflected in subforums dedicated to either. Both interests are usually catered for in musicians' boards, but some of the forums focus explicitly on the material side of music-making, such as 'The Gear Page' or 'Gearslutz', while others like 'Bandmix' promote networking to help musicians to join a band.

Message boards can provide valuable insights into the way GAS is negotiated in a significant community of practice. Though not replacing local communities of musicians, online forums for many players have become a source of information and a fundamental part of their musical identity. Online and offline communities are not identical, but they are similar (Hartmann 2016; Orton-Johnson 2014) and shape each other (Bakardjieva 2003, 2005; Wenger 1998: 79). Experiences from offline communities are often the basis for online discourses, whereby meanings and practices from virtual communities equally influence local practices. For example, not all members of a band need to be part of an online community. Even if only one band member participates online, their online community experience can explicitly and implicitly shape the negotiation of meaning in the local group.

We analyse online communities of practice for two reasons. Firstly, it allows evaluating the previous theoretical deliberations on GAS that were informed by ac-

ademic sources on music technology and theories from other disciplines such as consumption studies, sociology, psychology and psychiatry. Secondly, since the survey of musicians raised as many questions as it answered, qualitative data from a ‘natural’ source may help explain some of the remaining questions. Our research interest is therefore to understand the GAS discourse in these communities of practice. How explicitly is GAS discussed in the general negotiation of meaning? What cultural practices are associated with it? What are the affective responses to it? Is GAS a shared practice that defines the community? And if so, to what extent is GAS a ‘learned’ behaviour resulting from participation in the community?

7.1 Method

The analysis uses Kozinets’ (2020) method of ‘netnography’ as a differentiated set of techniques that allows for a ‘cultural focus on understanding the data derived from social media data’ (Kozinets 2020: 6f). Netnographic inquiry ‘seeks to understand the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, practices, networks and systems of social media’ (Kozinets 2020: 14), including message boards. In contrast to other ethnographic methods, netnography is systematic and requires following a defined set of ‘moves’ (Kozinets 2020: 139ff). In the first move of *initiation*, the research objectives and ethical considerations must be addressed. The second move, *investigation*, narrows down the scope by exploring web sources. The third move of *immersion* involves reading and observing online traces and collecting notes in an ‘immersion journal’. The fourth move of *interacting* with online participants is optional. In the fifth move of *integration*, the data are collected, analysed and interpreted in a holistic and hermeneutic manner, reflecting an iterative research process. The final move of *incarnation* consists of a structured presentation of the findings.

Ethics

Despite the popularity of online research, there are still no standard ethical practices (Eynon et al. 2016). Woodfield’s (2018) collected edition *The Ethics of Online Research* highlights many challenges but offers little concrete advice or guidance, while Halford (2018) argues that ethical best practice standards are rarely transferable to online research. She suggests not to rely on established deontological and consequentialist ethical practices but to turn to ‘situational ethics’ that ‘recognizes the importance of moral deliberation throughout the ethics process’ (Halford 2018: 21). Eynon et al. (2016) emphasise that the three pillars of ethics—confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent—present a challenge in online research. The Internet’s perceived anonymity let people disclose more details and discuss topics or even express extreme opinions that otherwise, in a face-to-face situation, they would not be prepared to reveal (Eynon et al. 2016: 23; Kozinets 2020: 203ff). Another ethical

issue often debated is unobtrusive observation, known as ‘lurking’. Such a non-reactive approach enables the researcher to collect data in a naturalistic setting because the people under investigation are not aware that they are being studied (Janetzko 2016: 76). There is also a wealth of easily accessible and searchable online discussions (Hewson 2016: 68). However, in contrast to offline settings where the observer is recognisable at least to some extent, the researcher’s complete invisibility in online research has been a concern of many scholars (see also Garcia et al. 2009).

For Kozinets (2020: 197ff), the degree of public access determines ethical procedures. Private sites that require registration and login with a password should be treated more confidentially than public sites that anyone can open in a browser, which is the case with most message boards that only require registration to post messages. Still, this is not a free ticket because members may have a reasonable expectation of privacy. Kozinets (2020: 203) suggests focusing on forum users’ discussions instead of the users themselves. In certain situations, ‘cloaking’ may be required, for example, to cite the website, but not the pseudonym, or to subtly alter verbatim quotes to make users difficult to trace (Kozinets 2020: 400f; Markham 2012). Especially when dealing with sensitive topics or a vulnerable population, this precaution is demanded. Cloaking is not required if the data are not sensitive, the population not vulnerable, and pseudonyms are used.

Since our analysis of musicians’ boards focuses neither on a sensitive topic nor vulnerable groups, we have not altered verbatim quotes because it would change the original statement and likely alter its meaning (Markham 2012). However, we have not revealed the users’ nicknames nor specified the forum unless necessary for the argumentation. Following Kozinets (2020) and Halford (2018), we used our moral discretion to protect forum users wherever possible.

Data Collection and Investigation

Netnography follows a structured approach to search processes and data collection. It is characterised by a ‘double funnel’ which, in an explorative first step, narrows down the topic or keywords before the actual research begins. This first step is essential, given the vast amount of data available online. The data collection undertakes five distinct ‘operations’ (Kozinets 2020: 215ff). First, the topic is simplified by determining search terms or keywords, which are explored in a second operation using a search engine. The third operation of ‘scouting’ serves to get a ‘feeling’ for the topic, documented in an immersion journal that replaces traditional ethnographic field notes (Kozinets 2020: 136). Fourth, the most relevant data sites are selected; the data need not be comprehensive but must contain high-quality information representative of the phenomenon. Finally, the chosen data, such as forum threads, are stored.

Tab. 5. Analysed Forums and Occurrence of Search Terms

Forum	Number of hits		
	'GAS'	'Gear Acquisition Syndrome'	Combined Boolean search
https://forum.bandmix.com	154	1	3
https://www.harmonycentral.com/forum	1,720	5	112
https://www.thegearpage.net/board/index.php	57,300	256	273
https://talkbass.com	78,800	495	592
https://basschat.co.uk	12,700	33	78
https://www.guitarscanada.com/forums	1,380	7	9
https://www.ultimate-guitar.com/forums	21,000	172	201
https://www.gearslutz.com/board/so-many-guitars-so-little-time	844	24	40
https://www.drummerworld.com/forums	2,310	61	112
https://www.drumchat.com	1,280	396	335
https://www.drumforum.org	3,070	46	26
https://www.keyboardforums.com	40	13	13
https://forum.saxontheweb.net/forum.php	4,440	144	197
https://cafesaxophone.com	1,120	41	30
https://www.trumpetherald.com/forum	2,390	7	7

Note: Numbers taken on 14 July 2020

As Kozinets (2020: 193) explains, '[i]nvestigative data are not directly created by the researcher's questions or writing but, instead, are created by generally unknown others and selected for various reasons by the netnographic researcher to include in the project'. Participant engagement allows further targeted data collection, but most netnographies only utilise unobtrusive online observation (Kozinets 2020: 194).

Having already engaged with forum users who participated in our survey upon our invitation, we limited our analysis to observing message boards. A practical problem we immediately encountered was that the search functions on message boards generally do not accept short terms such as 'GAS'. This problem can be worked around by searching for '*GAS*', but the results will include all words containing the three letters in that order and other meanings of the word, such as gas as

a synonym for fuel. To improve search quality, we used Google and its ‘site:’ operator, which does not require specific search terms. Google’s search engine also automatically included different spellings like ‘G.A.S.’. The best results were finally achieved with the Boolean operator ‘OR’ (Karch 2020) to search for ‘GAS’ and ‘Gear Acquisition Syndrome’ in one go: ‘site:https://www.drummerworld.com/forums “GAS” OR “Gear Acquisition Syndrome”’. Google’s intelligent engine, combined with the Boolean operator, ensured that all results were GAS-related in the right sense. Furthermore, setting the search engine to display 100 hits per page helped to filter out duplicate results. Table 5 shows the forums analysed and the number of hits for the search terms ‘GAS’, ‘Gear Acquisition Syndrome’ and the combined Boolean search. Forums for which the search procedure did not work were not considered in the analysis.

All identified threads from the fifteen message boards were scouted manually. Data-thin and redundant threads were excluded when saving the data or gradually removed during the analysis. This process resulted in our final sample of 433 threads. Observations made during the scouting and saving procedure were collected in an immersion journal so that overarching observations beyond the level of individual threads and forums were captured.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Following Kozinets’s (2020: 321ff) suggestion, we used qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) to systematically investigate a large amount of data. Since the data analysis guidelines of netnography are relatively vague apart from collating, coding and optionally triangulating data or methods (Kozinets 2020: 332ff), we applied Mayring’s (2014) systematic ‘summarising content analysis’ method, which is compatible with netnography and gives more structure to the analysis. This form of content analysis aims to ‘reduce the material in such a way that the essential contents remain, in order to create through abstraction a comprehensive overview of the base material which is nevertheless still an image of it’ (Mayring 2014: 64). The category system is created inductively. Not all material is considered for analysis. According to Mayring (2014: 82), no new categories can be found once ten to fifty per cent of the data has been coded. At this point, the category system will be revised and refined to ensure that the research questions are exactly addressed and that the categories do neither overlap nor are too broad or narrow.

Our analysis started with ‘The Gear Page’ as the most gear-centred forum with the largest number of threads dedicated exclusively to GAS. Although it represented only ten per cent of the total sample, most categories of the final category system could be derived from this forum alone. The subsequent analysis of the other forums added some details and further examples for different instruments. After approximately fifty per cent of the material, we reached ‘theoretical saturation’ (Glaser & Strauss 1967: 61; Strauss 1987: 21) so that only potentially useful verbatim quotes

were coded. That sped up the coding process considerably, which, however, prevented us from analysing the category system quantitatively. The immersion journal still provided sufficient insights into the quantitative relevance of specific practices. The decision to prioritise a higher number of forums was taken to ensure that all instruments necessary for our investigation are represented. As far as interpretation is concerned, we drew on references to the theories and studies discussed in the previous chapters.

7.2 Findings

7.2.1 Standard Community Practices

GAS as Learned Communal Behaviour

The message boards' analysis confirmed that musical equipment plays a prominent role in community life and is part of its social and discursive conventions, regardless of the forum and type of instrument. Membership in these communities implies an interest not only in playing but also in gear. Introductory threads where new members are welcomed make this evident. These threads can be classified into two kinds, with the first one warning newcomers of the danger of 'infecting' themselves with GAS, which takes forms like:

Welcome to the home of GAS (gear acquisition syndrome). Proceed at your own risk.

Beware the dreaded GAS. It lurks here. Daily.

Beware the dreaded GAS. Gear Acquisition Syndrome will take up residence with you at some point after you've got your first bass and rig. Pretty soon you'll be looking at other basses, amps, cabs and all sorts of geeky stuff with raw lust whilst reaching for a remortgage³⁹ application form. It's inevitable. Just thought I should warn you.

You'll have fun here but it can be expensive. So will need to learn about GAS, which is gear acquisition syndrome. After looking at and reading about so much nice gear you will be lusting after much of it.

The last quote is particularly illustrative because, in line with the notion of 'communities of practice', it shows that joining the community requires learning the common discourse and practices (Wenger 1998). For many musicians, this means socialisation with an emphasis on the material requirements and luxuries of playing music.

³⁹ In this chapter, we do not correct grammatical errors in user posts, nor do we mark them with 'sic!'.

The second kind of threads comprises introductions characterised by the newcomers 'outing' themselves as 'GAS addicts'. The following quotes portray some of the most representative examples:

My name is ... i live in northern virginia and i am a long time sufferer of gear acquisition syndrome.

My name is ... and I have GAS!

I suffer badly from Guitar Acquisition Syndrome, or GAS, and I have a tendency to encourage it in others.

[I'm] a chronic case of Guitar Acquisition Syndrome. I have a team of specialists from three of the area guitar purveyors working around the clock in an effort to satiate my G.A.S., but things are not looking good. The luthiers are telling me I only have a few weeks before my new bout of severe G.A.S. will surface. It's a tough time, I'm slacking at work and it's difficult to socialize with my girlfriend, but I'll keep fighting the good fight and hopefully I can beat this horrible disease.

With these introductory posts, newcomers likely intend to show commonality with other community members and demonstrate familiarity with the common discourse, which may allow them to start at a higher 'rank', as they are fluent in the social conventions (Kozinets 1999).

The previous discussion of virtual communities concluded that although musicians' boards cannot be defined per se as 'virtual communities of consumption', they seem to share characteristics because consumption knowledge is acquired 'alongside knowledge of the online group's cultural norms, specialized language and concepts' (Kozinets 1999: 254). There are several indicators that GAS is expected behaviour, which new members need to learn. As a universally known abbreviation, GAS is omnipresent in pinned threads on forum acronyms on all message boards. Most forums have several 'lingo' threads where terms are continuously added to the common knowledge of language use (Wenger 1998: 125f), and in all of them, GAS is expected. It is therefore not surprising when a user marvels: 'Two pages into a thread about abbreviations on TGP [The Gear Page], and not a single mention of GAS (gear acquisition syndrome)!?!?!'. Similarly, experienced users are expected to know the abbreviation, or else they will be accused of being a forum troll or bot: '1000 posts on TGP and doesn't know what GAS is??? I smell a rat'. However, the attitude is different when new community members genuinely ask what GAS means; such threads are frequent on all the analysed message boards. For example, one user wonders: 'I've heard the expression Gas which I figure means that you're needing something ... anyone able to tell us what it really means?'. In such cases, experienced members are more than willing to illuminate the novice with answers like: 'GAS: Acronym for Gear Acquisition Syndrome. The unavoidable compulsion to spend money one doesn't have, on gear one doesn't need, in the misguided belief that doing so will make one a better player'. As this explanation suggests, the forums differ in

their general attitude towards GAS, with some being more critical than others, but generally, it is discussed in all forums. In no one is this more evident but The Gear Page, whose primary purpose is to discuss music equipment in order to accommodate the musicians' mutual interest in lusting for gear. The following statements are examples thereof:

Welcome to Gear Lust Central! This is where the motto is 'If you ain't got it, You NEED it!' The most profound purveyors of G.A.S. on the interwebs! G.A.S. = Gear Acquisition Syndrome. Where EVERYBODY is waiting for some new toy in the post/FedEx/UPS. Rest assured that simple requests for product guidance will be met with recommendations to buy the biggest, baddest product with ALL the bells and whistles that you won't need or use for a minimum of 5 years (if ever) and that during that time the biggest, baddest, bestest will have changed at least 3 times. No cynicism involved, just a hard look at the reality that is TGP.

Welcome to The Gear Page and a lifelong struggle with gear acquisition syndrome (GAS).

TGP has never been about building the house, its about worshipping the hammer.

I expect my TGP membership to be revoked soon—I realized last week I haven't purchased an amp in 2019.

Communities of practice are not limited to either online or offline groups, and they overlap with other parts of society (Bakardjieva 2003, 2005; Wenger 1998: 79). This fact is proven by the discussion and remembrance of Walter Becker, who coined the term GAS (Becker 1996). Apart from threads in nearly all forums that describe Becker as the 'inventor' of the term, some forums like The Gear Page praise him for his impact on such online communities: 'Did you guys see that Walter Becker died? Aside from all the music, the man created the term Gear Acquisition Syndrome. We owe him, and our creditors, a great debt'. Becker's editorial put him on the map of musicians' online communities of practice. After his passing, the auction of his equipment—an impressive total of 1,085 items, mostly guitars and amplifiers (Julien's Auction 2019)—further strengthened Becker's status as an icon in the gear-fixated musicians' world. As a member of The Gear Page states in awe, '[t]he man had some world class GAS!'

Another variation of GAS as learned behaviour on these message boards is seen in the tendency of new members to quickly develop the expectation that they should spend time researching and updating their equipment:

When I first starting playing guitar in mid-2015 (I'm 49 now) I spent so much time on Reverb, eBay, Craigslist, etc. looking and buying gear. I thought that's what all guitarists did, buy as much gear as possible so I joined the party. My homepage at work was Reverb, I was online all day until I fell asleep acquiring stuff. In late 2016 my playing wasn't advancing as fast as I'd liked. Long story short I realized it was because I wasn't playing guitar all that often. Why? I was spending all my

time GAS-ing. On the flip side of that I was chasing tone so hard I would spend hours dialing amps, pedals, etc. and still not playing all that much.

This post indicates that the new player had gained a false impression by observing the common discourse, which let him exaggerate the expected material occupation beyond the average. The illustrated player overemphasised research on gear until he eventually realised that the ratio between research and playing was off. These threads are relatively common, suggesting that learning an instrument while participating in forums can easily lead to a discrepancy between playing and dealing with gear (see also Cole 2018) that, if the imbalance is realised, can be readjusted during musical maturation. Nevertheless, the community gives its newer members the impression that buying and upgrading their musical equipment is expected. The following post by a 15-year-old novice guitarist makes this quite clear:

So I made the mistake of walking into a guitar store and checking out the new Christmas stock and I felt like a paedophile at Disney land looking at all the expensive guitars XD I tried a red ESP custom shop and I loved it. It had a beautiful red finish and it was equipped with emg 81/85s. I wanted it so bad. The guitar I have right now is an ltd ec 331 with emg 81/85s and tbh [to be honest] I probably wouldn't be able to tell the difference in tone between the two guitars with my 15 year old undeveloped ears since they're both mahogany guitars with emgs. But seriously I have an obsession now! I've also made the mistake of looking up zakk wylde signatures (I'll admit I'm more of a zakk wylde fan boy than I'd like to admit) and his Gibson les Paul bullseye is now my dream guitar. Seriously the fact that it's gonna be years before I can afford something like that makes me miserable. I get this weird notion in my head sometimes that my guitar isn't good enough for me to advance on and I honestly don't think that's true and I think I'm just overthinking. As I said before my ears probably can't tell the difference between a zakk wykde bullseye with emgs and my current ltd. I'm planning on taking up a job soon and start saving for new gear such as pedals but I might put it towards a new guitar. Have any of you guys suffered from bad gas? How did you get through?

Aware that it is not true, the guitarist nonetheless blames their current equipment's inadequacy for the slow progress as a player. They may not even be able to distinguish instruments by their sound, but a more expensive guitar, or one played by an esteemed player, still raises hopes of musical improvement. This insensitivity to musical details matches Crowdy's (2013) observation that musicians tend to make unfounded claims about equipment based on their attitudes and beliefs and that the instrument is more important as a proxy for something else than how it actually sounds. This observation is also consistent with the findings of Fernandez and Lastovicka's (2011) study, according to which a tribute or signature guitar is expected to channel 'magic' into its player.

The following post shows another form of the expected buying and upgrading behaviour:

Does every pedal board need a booster? I was going to get one, but I am pretty happy how my board is behaving so far. I placed an overdrive before my distortion pedal and it seems to work great. When should you use a boost/pre-amp?

The guitarist has no need for a boost pedal, but conformity to social conventions makes them ask if they were doing something wrong. Other related threads pose questions such as ‘at what point do you upgrade from your first guitar and amp?’, ‘when is it a time for a guitar upgrade?’ or ‘how many guitars are enough?’. These threads suggest that it is not the musical needs that dictate buying behaviour but rather the expectation of the community of practice. The ‘use-value’ (Cole 2018) is replaced by social conformity.

A variation of this phenomenon occurs when users want to adapt to the pressure to buy but feel the need to justify their gear collection by their level of playing:

This probably is a stupid question, and I know you[r] skill doesn’t determine how many guitars you can have, but I’m 15 and don’t have a lot of cash. I don’t wanna buy another guitar and have two if I don’t feel like I’m good enough to actually need two. How good should I be to have two guitars? (what songs/techniques should I be able to know/play)

This musician seems to be reflective enough to realise that owning several instruments may only be musically useful if needed for specific playing styles, songs or genres or if the player’s abilities are good enough to utilise the potential that another instrument might offer. However, the post points to the idea that an expansion of the gear collection accompanies musical progress. Such threads are commonplace in all forums. Therefore, it is only natural that many threads are asking for inspiration when it comes to the ‘problem’ of running out of GAS and equipment to buy:

Can anyone relate to the feeling of... I’m done buying drum stuff? I’m there. No desire for anything else since I got a tom tree for my walnut set. I mean where else is there to go? I’m in the promised land already. I worked so hard to get here, why would I want to leave and start over? I got a great guitar amp, 2 Fender guitars, and I am done buying guitar stuff too. It’s a good feeling not being distracted by gear. One less distraction to stand between myself and my playing. I never thought I would get to this place. Not sure how long it will last, but right now I feel like it’s permanent. To illustrate this, I still have \$1,000 of play money from what I got when my Mom passed on. It’s my money to do with as I wish. I honestly can’t think of anything to spend it on musically, and I’ve tried. That’s how I know. The money is not burning a hole in my pocket. Weird.

This member feels relieved presently not to ‘suffer’ from GAS, and some others share that they were at this point for a while before they ‘relapsed’. Such threads of players reporting on their newly developed mastery over the compulsive urge to buy are relatively rare, though. More common are the ones reading ‘What could bring you out of your GAS retirement?’, ‘Want a new instrument but don’t know what’ or

'It was Christmas so it's time for new gears'. These threads demonstrate that although some users may seriously wish to be free of GAS, most like the desire to buy (see also Belk et al. 2003) irrespective of whether the item is needed for their playing. The inspiration for purchases comes in various forms. Like in the practice of record collectors displaying photos of their collections online (Shuker 2010: 199), there are photo documentary threads (see also Cole 2018) entitled 'My year in GAS' or 'Show me your pedalboard' that help musicians, in the words of a forum member, to 'make mental notes of what you want from that setup' of other players. These are attractive threads that allow musicians to find pleasure in self-seduction (Baudrillard 1983; Deighton & Grayson 1995; Reekie 1993). On a pure content level, they are meaningless, as even the threads' creators acknowledge. They are mainly meant to inform the community of gear-related practices in the expectation of receiving positive reinforcement and potentially gaining status. Another related purpose is to maintain the discourse on equipment that is crucial for the community's social life, which is reflected in three exemplary posts:

I thought I'd post what gear I bought and sold this year... not that anyone cares, but it might make for an interesting thread for each of us to talk about what we sold and what we bought.

GAS: Gear Acquisition Syndrome. The constant need for musician to constantly buy and hoard masses of musical equipment that they probably won't use very much any way. It's been too long since I saw one of these threads and they're always good fun (and surprisingly educational and relevant too.) So post which ever basses, amps, pedals, strings, straps, parts, etc in this thread to let off your mad GAS.

I know I'm not alone in my perpetual quest to acquire certain pieces of gear. Often this list changes... I find something new I didn't know existed, I try something out that disappoints... Life happens. It would be interesting to see what everyone's currently GASSing over, see what interests we share, hopefully be introduced to new gear I was unaware of.

These posts are further evidence that GAS is prevalent in these communities, which shows in that it is expected of members to learn about equipment and in the frequent discussion of gear-related behaviour. Looking at other musicians' setups and proudly presenting gear they intend to buy or have bought is what gives them pleasure. Like collecting, discussing and presenting gear is a shared social practice (Christ 1965; Formanek 1991; Sherif et al. 1961; Shuker 2010). Although this can be motivated by social hierarchy (Bourdieu 1986), most of the respective threads tend to suggest comradery (Formanek 1991). Gear envy—or 'mimetic desire' (Girard 1977)—is relatively uncommon. Users rather delight in receiving kind feedback on their favourite equipment, and they are happy to support others in their gear-related efforts. Moreover, in addition to threads in which members report retrospectively on their GAS

items at the end of a year, there are dedicated wish list threads in which desired gear for a new year is presented and discussed. These lists contain both realistic acquisitions and dreams of items that are unlikely to be affordable but can still be hoped for, which makes the desire even more pleasurable (Belk et al. 2003: 340ff; Denegri-Knott & Molesworth 2010: 69). Planning and dreaming about gear are standard practices in these forums that serve to bond people. They get to know each other better because the envisioned gear allows the informed musician to draw conclusions about a fellow musician's personality. Such social practice shows a strong resemblance with what Belk et al. (2003: 335f) have described as 'desire for sociality'.

Events are an integral part of online communities. These, however, rarely happen at the same time for the entire community. Instead, events are long-term themes to which every community member can contribute with something worth announcing. A significant 'event' is the day new equipment is bought, celebrated with posts in dedicated threads for the occasion, such as 'New Guitar Day', 'New Amp Day' or 'New Pedal Day' (see also Cole 2018). As with most GAS-related practices, there is some ambivalence because users commonly continue buying and posting pictures of their new gear although recognising the futility of this practice:

New Guitar Day... has lost its mojo ... That's right fellas... today was NGD [New Guitar Day]. I barely even plugged the damn thing in. It was a Hamer Special I bought from a guy here on TGP [The Gear Page]. Nice guitar, but when I did finally get it tuned up and I played a few things, it just sounded like... me. Tone is in the fingers I guess. Need to stop buying **** I don't need... like more guitars.

I've discovered that I'm getting bigger thrills these days out of discovering and learning new things about music than getting another big rectangular box from UPS again. My hands have morphed into good tone producing tools after being honed over literally thousands of gigs, so new effects, amplifiers, and cabinets aren't of much interest anymore. I do spend some money on Skype lessons these days, which isn't inexpensive when the best instructors are involved ... Of course there is no NBD [New Bass Day] glamor attached to any of this, and there are no endorsement deals for players that value knowledge and concepts over hard goods.

The second post is particularly interesting because it highlights the 'glamour' of reporting newly acquired items. Communities work with positive reinforcement (Skinner 1938), and in some forums, it seems that gear-related actions like buying and trading have a higher value than playing it. One reason could be that playing involves a much larger world of preferences and tastes (Bourdieu 1986; Foucault 1991), such as genres, styles or musical role models, making it more challenging to relate to community members from various places in the world. In contrast, an interest in gear is universal, possibly making it easier to find common ground.

As the previous deliberations have shown, it is commendable, if not a mark of excellence, to come out as a 'GAS addict' and to frequently show off purchases. Many threads point to comradeship, while others indicate a kind of social order. On

several message boards, there are ‘Rate my gear’ threads, in which more exquisite pieces of equipment show good taste (Arsel & Bean 2013; Foucault 1991), thus identifying their owner belonging to the social group’s elite (Bourdieu 1984, 1986; Kozinets 1999). A variation is ‘GAS test’ threads, from which the community can assess who is affected by the syndrome the most. These tests are manifested in all forums. Often, they are specific to individual instruments, such as this sophisticated test for saxophonists:

In response to ...’s request for a numerical scoring system to quantify saxophone-based Gear Acquisition Syndrome (GAS), I offer the following scale.

- For every saxophone you own over one each of SATB, give yourself 10 points.
- For each sax that is the same pitch as another sax, add 5 points.
- For each sax that hasn’t been played in more than six months, add 5 points.
- For each mouthpiece in excess of the number of playable saxes, add 2 points.
- For each mouthpiece that hasn’t been played in more than six months, add 2 points.
- For each mouthpiece marked with the words NEW YORK or HOLLYWOOD, add 10 points.
- For each mouthpiece professionally refaced, add 5 points.
- For each mouthpiece professionally refaced more than once, add 20 points.
- For each sax not currently playable, add 5 points.
- For each sax that has remained unplayable for more than one year, add 10 points.
- For each soprano, bass, or sax in a key other than Bb or Eb, add 20 points.
- If you own or have ever owned more than one bass sax at a time, add 100 points.
- For each weirdo instrument such as straight alto, typewriter, slide, plastic body, padless, tubax, etc., add 25 points.
- For each High Pitch, manual octave key, experimental, prototype, or 19th century Franco-Belgian horn with little round blobs instead of roller keys, add 40 points.
- For a full-size contrabass, add 200 points.

Classifications:

0-9 points: You are relatively free of GAS. Blow in peace, and remember that an artist never blames his tools.

10-49 points: You have a roving eye but still put most of your air through the horn. Stay focused!

50-99 points: You may have GAS. If you’re either spending more time acquiring gear than playing, or acquiring more gear than you’ll have time to play, open an eBay store or seek support in SOTW [Sax on the Web] Forum.

100-199 points: You have GAS. In addition to the remedies previously discussed, family intervention may be necessary, along with moving to a smaller living space.

200-499 points: You have Bipolar-Acquisitive Disorder with GAS (‘BAD GAS’). In BAD GAS phase, your living space HAS become smaller. Your family has either intervened or left completely. If you have ever attempted to play more than 3 saxophones at once, or gone more than a year without needing to buy reeds, you definitely have BAD GAS.

500 or more points: You are a GAS Hoarder, Obsessive Genus (‘GAS HOG’). Why

are you reading this? Go look at The Marketplace. Or eBay. Or netinstruments.com. Or Craigslist. Or the classifieds. Or...?

The following test is aimed at guitarists, yet it is general enough to cover all instruments:

How can you tell if you have GAS? One way is to answer some of these questions. If you answer 'yes' to any of them, then you probably have GAS.

- 1- Each time you sign on to a Guitar Forum, do you have to check your signature to see if it's still right?
- 2- Have you ever just visited a Guitar Forum for 'fun and information' then all of a sudden you're in your Paypal account hoping to score a new peice of gear?
- 3- Have you ever bought gear and sold the item the day it arrived?
- 4- Have you ever bought an item and sold it before it arrives in the mail?
- 5- Do you see a 'cycle' occuring with your rig? Meaning; you swap guitars for a while, then pedals, then amps looking for the perfect rig and then as soon as you 'cycle through' it all you start all over?

Similarly, this keyboard-specific test could be applied to all electric instruments:

1. When the behavior you exhibit when waiting for the UPS guy is as erratic as that of man at the hospital waiting to hear that he just became a father
2. When you tell the UPS guy you've been playing all your life, because you're so excited that you don't know a better, more truthful answer, lol
3. When you use all the locks to lock that door before you unbox the stuff
4. When you get an ungrounded extension power cord
5. When you turn on your synth right on the floor, immediately after unboxing it, before first setting it on a stand or table
6. When your heart sinks if your synth turns on then immediately turns off on its own
7. When the spot for your new baby has already been cleared

Other threads list symptoms for the reader to check their GAS-level or to add to the list of indicators, which include:

- Searching the Internet for videos and demos of something that caught your eye.
- Actually watching unboxing videos is a very strong indication of GAS.
- Downloading PDF manuals.
- Rehearsing the script you 'might' use with your significant other 'if' you were going to buy the gear in question.
- Stopping by a music store on your lunch break to see if they have a demo unit available... just out of curiosity.
- Looking at your creative workspace and considering where the new gear would go if you ever did make the purchase.

- Searching Internet forums and reading every thread relevant to your new obsession. (Note: If you find yourself composing a response to someone's criticism even though the critic's post is weeks or months old then you need to plan and budget for the purchase... it is going to happen.)
- Placing an item in the cart knowing full well you won't or can't buy it. Just to see what it looks like in the cart.
- Placing a low bid on an item you know you won't or can't afford to win, but hey you owned it for an hour or day, until you get outbid and let it go.
- Checking the status of the shipment by using the tracking number online repeatedly, sometimes several times a days... UNTIL the box arrives.
- Your heart sinking when the status says 'OUT FOR DELIVERY', meaning the truck is coming SOON today!!

GAS is widely accepted and so omnipresent that community members find it worthwhile starting threads to discuss gear for which they never had GAS or think they will ever have. This humorous presentation of GAS resembles that of collectors who, according to Belk (1995b: 480, 2001a: 80), often joke about their obsessive behaviour because unlike other addictions, GAS is socially accepted.

There are, however, numerous users who regard GAS-fetishization as problematic and mention 'help groups' like the 'GAS sufferers anonymous support group', 'GASaholics anonymous' or 'Gear Minimalism and GAS Support Group', or urge founding them. We also found confessions that could just as well come from anonymous alcoholics, for example: 'Hi everyone, my name is ... and I have GAS'. Such confessions show that GAS can be on the threshold between joyful pastime and problematic compulsive behaviour (O'Guinn & Faber 1989; Rook 1987), of which this post is an example:

Oh my God, I'm truly not alone with my addiction, an amp junkie in the worst way. If my nose was any bigger, I'd be snorting amps! There hasn't been any room in my closet for the last 10 years, and it's a big closet. And, I'm on my second story stacking them. F*** the clothes anyway. There's no place left to hide things from my wife. You KNOW you have a problem when you're buying doubles of the same amp! And, it doesn't help when your guitar playing buddies tell you, "'Hey, two of those would make great end tables.' You think to yourself, 'Yea, they would, wouldn't they.'

Support groups for GAS-afflicted musicians host, for example, 'No buying' threads to help the community deal with the problem. Some threads are open all year round, and others appear at the beginning of a year when musicians declare their resolution not to buy any more equipment.

Often, it is not clear how serious members are when they discuss their desires and compulsions. One of the more serious topics seems to be finances, especially

when it comes to using credit cards regularly to pay for new equipment. Some musicians argue that it can make sense to buy equipment on credit if it is a good deal and kept long-term because it reduces the need or desire to buy other, possibly inferior, items that may not meet individual requirements. Others point out that ‘credit inflates the price of whatever you are buying’ and should only be used if ‘the gear makes you more money than the monthly payments’. Since only a minority of the community makes substantial money from their music, most musicians agree that ‘buying on credit leads to a life fighting uphill’ and should be avoided at all costs. If a fellow musician is recognised to be spending more money on gear than they can afford, the humorous tone will usually be abandoned; instead, they will be warned about such risky behaviour.

One of the main questions throughout our investigation has been whether players of different instruments vary in the degree of their propensity to GAS. There are currently no studies that have systematically compared instrument-specific behaviour on message boards. We observed that guitarists are the most vocal about their interest in gear. When playing more than one instrument, they tend to perceive ‘guitar GAS’ worse than, for example, ‘saxophone GAS’. The main reason speculated for GAS being so pronounced amongst guitar players is the instrument’s general affordability. Moreover, GAS is considered more common among electric guitar players than acoustic guitarists because more equipment is to buy, particularly devices that are not too costly such as cables, effects and other gadgets. Objectively, however, there is insufficient evidence that one instrument group is significantly more or less affected by GAS than any other, which is consistent with our survey results. Similarly, communal practices and discourses differ marginally at best.

Effects of the Internet

Musicians have always discussed gear (Cole 2018; Hartmann 2016), but only the Internet and particularly Web 2.0 implemented the basis to connect people from distant places, which contributed to form special interest groups and facilitate discussions over long periods of weeks, months or years. The positive correlation between participation in the observed online communities and a pronounced interest in gear is so evident that no verbatim quotes are needed. We will instead examine some of the facilitating effects of the Internet on GAS-related behaviour, which can be divided into two categories: the wealth of information and the bigger and more convenient consumer market.

As far as available information is concerned, the discussions stress how easy it has become to find out about equipment on the Internet, for example, what is generally offered and what is on sale (McIntosh & Schmeichel 2004: 88f). Some older musicians reflect that they had read musicians’ magazines and catalogues before Web 2.0, which, however, limited their access to new information because the time between an item was introduced and finally appearing in a magazine or catalogue

was then much longer. Gathering information from print sources involved completely different practices, as one guitarist explains:

I remember when I started with guitar I used to love the sweet water and musicians friends catalog. Used to read them non stop and memorize the specs of all the guitars. There was so much time in between catalogs I came up with a few 'games' to keep them interesting. I would play 'what guitar I would buy on this page, these two pages, or what guitar would I love to have if I didn't have to pay for it.' Internet didn't give me GAS. I already had that. But it did change things. Comparing specs is easier. Information is more abundant. And I don't look through those catalogs any more.

When musicians were interested in a piece of equipment, research was 'labour-intensive and time-consuming', delaying the immediate impulse to buy or stopping the urge altogether. Other musicians stress that music stores were the primary source of information that was passed on by word of mouth. Also, buying and trading were carried out in local scenes so that equipment was exchanged between fellow musicians in close vicinity. The Internet has made information more accessible and, as many players argue, it has awakened desires, made 'gear lust much easier, faster and more frequent' and conditioned the brain in its continuous demand for something new ('neophilia'). Musicians' boards are regarded as particularly influential in this respect, with musicians reflecting that they were rarely ever tempted to trade equipment before joining the community. Internet access alone does not seem sufficient to trigger such urges. However, the Internet is said to have accelerated the GAS cycle (Leonhardt 2015; Power & Parker 2015; Wright 2006) so that by the time an online order arrives, a new object may already be desired (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth 2010). This acceleration is characteristic of increasingly commodified practices (Shuker 2010: 111; Straw 2000: 166). But not only forums, blogs and other websites dedicated to musical equipment are to blame. YouTube also creates desires for many musicians: partly because the desired gear can be seen and heard in contrast to text-based discussions or reviews, and partly because idols can be observed playing or presenting their rig.

The second significant benefit of the Internet is access to a bigger market, together with a much wider range of products in the musical instruments sector (Théberge 1997). Musicians highlight that 'so many more types of guitars are available to buy than there were pre-Internet' and that the increased choice from the larger variety of models has fuelled the desire that only weakly existed before the Internet. Furthermore, the Internet has forced local music instruments retailers to align their prices with national and international standards. Likewise, when shopping online, gear on sale can be purchased from remote retailers, making equipment less expensive to acquire and tempting musicians to buy. 'Bargain hunting', the 'thrill of the hunt' (Belk 1995b; Danet & Katriel 1989; McIntosh & Schmeichel 2004; Shuker 2010), has become a hobby for many musicians, especially on eBay and other trading

websites (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth 2010; Denegri-Knott & Zwick 2012). As many musicians admit, good deals have seduced them to buy more gear than they need which, however, would bear little risks of losing money. On the contrary, the practice of ‘flipping’ gear—buying and selling used equipment—even promises a plus if one knows the market. Increased opportunity and reduced risk seem to be the principal factors, as this musician suggests:

All the internet did was make it easier to dump gear for enough money to buy something else decent, and make it easier to find other decent gear. To the extent GAS has been enabled, I actually think that’s more to do with online sales. Before ebay/etc. it was really hard to get decent prices on used gear. Now we reasonably expect to get a decent return on used gear.

The downside of this stable second-hand market is that it has become increasingly difficult to score deals on eBay, even for lesser-known brands, as most auctioneers have become familiar with a wide variety of gear and its value (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth 2010). Denegri-Knott and Zwick (2012) propose that while eBay is a ‘pleasure dome’, its users quickly lose interest when bidding in auctions becomes a routine. Their observation is not consistent with our investigation, as we observed quite the opposite in the discussions. Many musicians study the market for years and use the service regularly to buy and sell gear. To minimise the efforts and ease boredom, they set up alerts and create other forms of automatisms that ultimately maximise their ‘flipping’ efficiency.

In addition to used gear, the increased number and availability of cheap devices manufactured outside the USA and Central Europe made many community members change their consumer behaviour. A guitarist explains the attractiveness of such products as follows, ‘I have fun buying cheap pedals direct from China about every month. For the price of dinner for two at Olive Garden I can get a new pedal and test it out’. Conversely, the Internet has allowed access to exclusive boutique devices that are not offered in local music stores:

The internet was awful for my GAS. I Live in the Midwest and rarely saw anything beyond the basic Fender, Gibson, Ibanez, Martin, Music Man, or Taylor. I’d see exotic guitars and pickups in magazines. Didn’t do much for me. I’d hear of various bands, but there wasn’t much I could do if my local shops didn’t have it in stock.

The Internet sure opens up the entire world of possibilities. Before 1996, anything I wanted in the way of gear was decided by what I could get in a local music store or order from the Musicians Friend or Mandolin Brothers catalogs. I used to fly from Atlanta to Charlotte on business once a month, and always left room in my suitcase for my Reliable Music shopping sprees! And yes, I would even make a day trip drive to Charlotte on a weekend if the purchase was too big for the plane.

Overall, the Internet provides access to a wealth of inexpensive and exclusive items, and it has facilitated a mass-market for used goods. The globalisation of these markets has minimised the chance of unexpected bargains, which is not much of a downside because standard prices are, in general, already low due to price matching. In line with interview statements of guitarists that Wright (2006) collected, most GAS-affected musicians prefer used gear, as it allows them to acquire items regularly without losing money. ‘Flipping’ gear appears to be an affordable way to realise ‘neophilia’ (Falk 1994), the fetish of striving or desiring continuously for something new.

Gendered Discourse

Judging by nicknames and profile photos, most musicians who post in gear-related threads appear to be male, consistent with the sample of our survey and similar studies (Herbst 2016, 2017a). We cannot say with certainty whether the gender ratio varies between the differently themed sub-forums of the message boards. Still, the common notion that GAS, just like record collecting (Bogle 1999; Shuker 2010) and hi-fi audio (Jansson 2010; Schröter & Volmar 2016), is a predominantly male phenomenon (Wright 2006: 26) is reflected in the communities analysed. Several threads are theorising why GAS may be a male behaviour. Some of the statements are outright sexist:

My theory of G.A.S. is, as follows, after a day’s worth of thinking about this idea I got this morning: G.A.S. hits us guys. Women don’t just understand. In fact, it is a biological/evolutionary thing for males. How many times have you heard a piece of gear described as ‘sexy’? This is the clue. Males want to own all females. They want to, even if they are married, still ‘own’ any female they deem worthy. And, when they can’t do this in modern society, they buy sexy gear. If they don’t do it at first, agonizing over a piece of gear, they end up saving and agonizing over it, before they give in and commit.

My day job happens to be as a researcher and teacher in the field of Evolutionary Psychology, so I can’t help but chime in here. There are both good theoretical reasons and tons of empirical data to support the idea that men and women differ, on average, in the characteristics they most value in potential mates. At risk of oversimplification, this boils down to men placing primary value on physical attractiveness in potential mates (i.e., cues of youth and fertility -- i.e. producing babies), and women placing primary value on status and resources (i.e., cues of the ability to provision for those babies). With this in mind, it makes sense than men probably suffer from G.A.S. more than women, the idea being to accumulate impressive stuff (like fancy sports cars, etc.) to advertise their resource-acquisition abilities. In contrast, the things that women ‘G.A.S.’ for (more broadly defined) tend more toward things that they believe will enhance their physical attractiveness, such as shoes and clothing, jewelry, and so forth.

[GAS is] inherent to our [male] nature because we want to live longer, attract more mates and make more babies. It's biology baby!

Several key concepts of consumption research focusing on desire like seduction, enchantment, lust, and other characteristics of embodied passion (Baudrillard 1983; Belk et al. 2003), clearly apply to these threads. As long as these attractions are limited to goods, they are harmless (Belk et al. 2003: 348; Campbell 1987: 86), but the objectification of women by equating them with equipment is purely sexist. Some musicians argue against such sexist explanation, stressing that the quest for constant improvement is inherent in human nature, regardless of gender. Their view accords with research suggesting that acquisition of possessions is fundamental to human development (Belk 1988; Campbell 1987). Others point out that it is individual interest, although this argumentation is disputed by those who claim, from an 'evolutionary perspective', that interest in (music) technology tends to be male (see also Berkers & Schaap 2018; Comber et al. 1993; Hallam et al. 2008, 2017). Little effort is made to refute this argumentation, which becomes evident from posts hardly ever referring to female musicians having GAS. On the other hand, we found only one female musician in all the analysed forums who 'shouted out' that women can just as well have GAS. Research on collecting in general (Baekeland 1994; Belk 2001a) and record collecting (Shuker 2010) indicates that women are no less ambitious collectors than men, but on the other hand, they neither tend to make their practice public because they feel less comfortable showing off cultural capital in competition. Therefore, it is quite possible that women, even as members of online communities, do not participate in gear contests that shape the GAS discourse.

Against the background that men in the forums outnumber women by far, conclusions about how GAS might differ between genders cannot be drawn from our analysis. Those communities do not take gender diverse or fluid categories into account. The discourse is based on binary gender distinctions that follow traditional role expectations (Ridgeway 2011). Wives and girlfriends are overwhelmingly regarded as obstacles to GAS (Becker 1996; Wright 2006). There are innumerable posts thereof, which can be divided into two categories. The distinct influence the significant other has on a purchase decision—financially or motivationally—is seen either as a factor making GAS-related behaviour more difficult or as a support in controlling irrational acquisitions for the musician's benefit. Whether or not the musician genuinely feels this way cannot be said, but it seems that adhering to this common trope is expected in the community and thus practised continuously, and across all the message boards we have analysed.

Variations and Cycles of GAS

The previous deliberations have discussed to what extent GAS is a defining aspect of communities of practice and how it is structurally embedded in the form of common threads. Now we will take a closer look at how GAS is discussed in the threads dedicated to GAS and in posts in response to more general threads.

One common way to justify or play down the adverse effects of GAS is to compare it with similar behaviour outside music. Relevant hobbies prone to GAS include ceramic and porcelain figurines, basketball shoes, fishing gear and golf clubs. Such comparisons lead to considerations like '[c]ompared to other hobbies, a \$1000 Guitar is not that much money' and 'I figure I could spend my money on worse things'. The community members claim that everything can become the focus of GAS and that everyone has 'xAS of some sort'. This formula is found on all message boards and results in specific modifications of the term GAS that are more tailored to the community or special interests within it. Examples of such modifications are: 'Amp Acquisition Syndrome (AAS)', 'Boutique Amp Acquisition Syndrome (BAAS)', 'Pedal Acquisition Syndrome (PAS)', 'Fuzz Acquisition Syndrome (FAS)', 'Pickup Acquisition Syndrome (PAS)', 'Kit Acquisition Syndrome (KAS)', 'Snare Acquisition Syndrome (SAS)', 'Trumpet Acquisition Syndrome (TAS)', 'Saxophone Acquisition Syndrome (SAS)', 'Mouthpiece Acquisition Syndrome (MAS)' and 'Musical Instruments Acquisition Syndrome (MIAS)'. The term can be adapted for practically anything and is not limited to instruments, instrument parts and electronics. The 'Finish Acquisition Syndrome (FAS)' refers to the desire to own instruments in a particular colour or lacquer, and the 'Gadget Acquisition Syndrome (GAS)' concerns relatively inexpensive discretionary purchases (Danziger 2004: 6f). The 'Guitar Repair Syndrome (GRS)' and the 'Tool Acquisition Syndrome (TAS)' are widespread amongst DIY enthusiastic musicians. Technophiles may identify themselves with the 'Firmware Acquisition Syndrome (FAS)' and guitar and bass players with the 'Profile Acquisition Syndrome (PAS)' in conjunction with virtual amplifiers (Herbst 2019a, 2021; Herbst et al. 2018). A synonym for 'Gear Acquisition Syndrome' is the 'Tone Acquisition Syndrome (TAS)', both sharing the same motivation yet TAS being much less commonly used. There is even mention of a 'Skill Acquisition Syndrome (SAS)', which one musician describes as 'much more rewarding long-term than GAS'. However, this expression is very uncommon, consistent with the greater emphasis on gear than playing in these forums. The examples demonstrate that 'gear', representing the first letter of GAS, can be replaced by anything. Moreover, the discourse suggests that such specialisations in niche equipment find an interested audience on these musicians' boards.

One variation of 'xAS' is the 'Tool Acquisition Syndrome (TAS)', which some musicians have additionally or instead of GAS. It is considered as bad, if not worse, as GAS, in line with Walter Becker's (1996) claim that 'Gear Modification Syndrome' is more severe than the acquisition syndrome. As a musician notes:

Tell you what is worse than GAS... TAS: tool acquisition syndrome. Unfortunately for me, my interest in remodeling and woodworking is greater than my GAS. Suddenly 500 dollar pedals seem downright affordable compared to 700 dollar router tables and 3K cabinet saws.

Some musicians regard frequent maintenance and modification as a side-effect of GAS that costs them time and money. Others believe that building their equipment from scratch or with kits is financially less dangerous because it involves lower expenses, and the building process takes longer than a normal GAS cycle occurring during practising and playing (Wright 2006: 31). In line with research on craft consumption (Cole 2018), the building of instruments and other gear can therefore be an effective way of breaking the over-commodification of the musical instruments industry.

As we have seen, GAS is treated by the community with humour but also as something that affects most of them noticeably. The strong personal interest in gear is expressed in what may be called ‘academic considerations’. Occasionally, journalistic and scholarly texts are discussed, for example, Wright’s (2006) book on GAS, which a musician discovered reading the article ‘Gear Acquisition Syndrome: Lustily Buying More Tools Than You Need’ in *Psychology Today* (Sherman 2011). Such discoveries support the community by validating that GAS, in the words of a member, is a ‘real thing’. Another article under discussion is ‘Urge to Own That Clapton Guitar Is Contagious, Scientists Find’, published in *The New York Times* (Tierney 2011), which includes excerpts of Fernandez and Lastovicka’s (2011) study and interviews with other academics. The thread discussing scholarly theories shows a high degree of critical thinking. There is the example of the ‘mojo’, which is supposed to motivate musicians to buy replica instruments, but the threads dismiss it as simplistic. Similarly, the study’s explanation for the differences between collectors and musicians who want to improve their gear to enhance their playing experience is felt to lack detail. Overall, the responses suggest scepticism about academic studies on GAS. One user writes:

I think that they [Fernandez & Lastovicka 2011] have focused on one dynamic fetishization with which they are familiar, and have put all buyers’ motivations inside their particular cognitive box. Biased science, to me, in that they are so tied to their deeper social theories that that’s all they see.

This rejection of scholarly work does not keep them from discussing GAS themselves in a quasi-academic manner. Similar to the various cycles and processes of collecting and buying we have discussed in the previous chapters (for example, Belk et al. 2003; Braun et al. 2016; McIntosh & Schmeichel 2004) and that are described in blogs on GAS (for example, Power & Parker 2015), the community develops models based on their experience. One user proposes the following model:

- 1) obsesses for weeks over a piece of gear
- 2) read every post and watch every YouTube video on that piece of gear
- 3) try and tell myself I don't need it and don't really want to spend the money
- 4) forget about it
- 5) remember it weeks (or months) later and happen upon an unbeatable deal on a used version, which is cheap enough that I can resell and not lose much if need be
- 6) pull the trigger after much anxiety
- 7) after a brief period of exhilaration, immediate buyers remorse
- 8) rewatch all YouTube videos & read every post again to make sure I made the right choice
- 9) gear arrives in the mail, I play it, it's fine, I forget all about the turmoil

At large, the posts in this thread confirm the model but point out that the cycle is too long. For most users, the 'honeymoon period' lasts about three weeks, after which 'I start finding reasons why what I have isn't quite good enough or why I should use something else. It's so completely stupid. I have various bouts of this throughout the calendar year. In fact, it usually flares up around summer'. The model Power and Parker (2015) propose on a blog (chapter 2.1) is also discussed critically, and revisions are suggested, for example, these three:

1. Opportunity (forum, catalog, ect.)
 2. Discovery
 3. Research
 4. Justification (defining why you need)
 5. Sacrifice (deciding what to sell to make the new need a purchase)
 6. Trigger pulling
 7. Anticipation (shipping, or making time to drive to the store with the cash burning a hole)
 8. Acquisition
 9. Euphoria (the only thing we can focus on)
 10. Regret/return to reality (not always regret, sometimes just acceptance of the item)
 11. Relapse
-
1. Discovery. 'Hmmm cool thing there, what does it do?'
 2. Research. 'What cool things does it do?'
 3. Study. 'Man if I had this thing, think of all the cool things I could do!'
 4. Obsession. 'Must look at every picture I can find! Must start/find threads that justify my usage of this thing! Must start finding things I can sell!'
 5. Acceptance. 'I'm buying it today.'

1. Discovery. ‘Hmmm cool thing there, what does it do?’
2. Research. ‘What cool things does it do?’
3. Study. ‘Man if I had this thing, think of all the cool things I could do!’
4. Compare. ‘Well, this isn’t really as cool as device X, and device Y doesn’t have shortcomings A, B, and C, and device Z is just cheaper.’
5. Obsession. ‘Must look at every picture I can find! Must start/find threads that justify my usage of this thing! Must start finding things I can sell!’
6. Acceptance. ‘I’m buying it today.’
7. Evangelization. Post overwhelmingly positive reviews of the thing you bought within the first few days of buying it, before you’ve found out about all its faults.
8. Rejection. The item ends up in either the closet, basement, garage, craigslist, or returned to the store where you purchased it.
9. Repetition. Find the next thing to GAS over...

The reasons for GAS and how it can be counteracted are discussed at great length. A frequently cited reason for repeating GAS cycles is that the acquisition of new gear triggers the urge for other updates, which is consistent with the idea of ‘craft consumption’ (Cole 2018; Hartmann 2016):

I don’t know if my amp GAS is made worse by my guitar GAS, or the other way around. But whenever I satisfy one, the other flares up.

My GAS just shifts. Bought a few nice guitars, bass amp, SR5, pedals, now looking for new amps. It never ends.

I have a problem that once I buy something ... it makes me buy other stuff to go with it.

It is not clear whether changes to the setup necessitate updating other parts of the gear (Hartmann 2016). It may well be that the desire to acquire depends on the kind of gear. For example, there may be different GAS cycles for instruments, amplifiers and other devices active at the same time but at different points in the cycle. Signs thereof can be seen in the following statement: ‘My amp GAS is gone. My guitar GAS has seriously been curbed. Pedal GAS is starting to trail off as well’.

7.2.2 Playing Versus Gear

GAS is concerned with, maybe even defined by, the relationship between gear and its actual use in playing. This determining distinction, as well as the overlap, are reflected in the discussions. Many musicians stress that they simply have an interest in gear. One form this interest can take is the curiosity to try out and compare brands or types of instruments as a form of musical exploration and as part of the development as a player (Pinch & Reinecke 2009). One bassist explains, ‘I like to get a new

bass, especially if it's a brand I haven't owned before, and figuring out what makes it tick. Each brand has its quirks, its strong points, etc. Some brands sound best with a certain kind of string. I like to find these things out'. These individuals point out that their curiosity does not require a long-term investment or even a purchase. For some, it is enough to play the equipment in a music store or rehearsal room. If the device is rare or brand new, then a purchase might be considered, even if selling is intended after trying it out.

In this context, several discussions emphasise that experimenting with different instruments and doing extensive research on equipment help musicians understand what sounds are available and which ones they prefer. This practice is considered 'reasonable' and should not be classified as GAS, as one musician argues:

If you don't know what you want, then you should research what's out there so you can make a choice. I think that's different from just buying stuff for the sake of having it, which is what I think GAS is. I've been around drums for so long, that I can kinda guess what piece of gear will give me what I want, and then I make it do so.

In the same vein, another community member stresses that acquiring instruments 'is not GAS if you genuinely believe the gear will help you improve'. The intent is crucial, and as several musicians argue, will the investment benefit musical projects and development, then it is legitimate and should not be dismissed as 'just GAS'.

Like the interest in exploring equipment, an experienced drummer speculates that the way of learning an instrument may have changed. In the past, drummers began learning their instrument on a practice pad or snare before slowly building up their mastery to a full drum kit. Nowadays, newcomers would tend to start with a full kit, and experimenting with equipment has become common. This forum member does not elaborate further, but it may be that technical command has been at least partially replaced by sonic exploration (Théberge 1997). If this is the case, then frequently acquiring and trading equipment must almost inevitably become a routine habit of the modern player and accompany their musical development. Such increasing importance to sonic variety equally applies to instruments other than the drums (Pinch & Reinecke 2009; Théberge 1997).

A large number of posts demonstrate an interest in gear without the urge to buy, for example: 'I like to read about gear but I'm not much interested in getting more stuff'. Such musicians like to browse gear-related websites and catalogues and visit music stores, knowing that they would not buy anything because their current setup has everything they need. Their interest in gear is based partly on an inherent interest and partly on being well informed to be able to participate in the community's common discourse (Wenger 1998). This behaviour accords with research showing that record collectors and avid eBayers find pleasure in knowing for how much vinyl records are going (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth 2010: 65).

In connection with the previous point of genuine interest, many community members stress that gear is part of the fun of their hobby or profession:

I long ago gave up explaining or defending the GAS thing to those who don't get it. I have played for 40 years, most of those for a living, and will always be obsessed with guitars. Amps, too ... Gear is just part of my fun. I am mostly a cheap guitar guy these days, but I still love buying and selling. I worked in a guitar shop for 20 years and I just can't stop. Don't want to stop.

I spend far more time looking at gear and watching demos than I do playing, but it's part of the enjoyment of the hobby as well I suppose.

If the gear itself is what makes you happy and you're happy with your playing standard, there's no harm whatsoever in spending all your time messing around with the gear aspect. You're no inferior to the guy practicing his iambic pantaloonian modes all night ... If the gear is the hobby and you're not getting into debt because you can't stop buying, then embrace it and accept that's what you're into.

Similarly, many musicians openly acknowledge having a greater passion for musical equipment than for playing. This passion for gear coincides with interview statements in Wright's (2006: 29) book that highlight musical purchases as a means of dealing with stress or as a reward for an accomplishment. Gratification is a major motivation for acquisitions, which is why many posts are stating that 'gear makes me happy'. Interest in gear for gear's sake culminates in the expressed fear of finding the perfect instrument or rig, which would make all future research into equipment and subsequent acquisitions pointless. Several threads point to this 'severe' but rare situation:

I really like trying different gear. And right now I have more than I need already. So just buying more (even though I could easily afford it) just seems silly.

Well I have been looking at all the new basses and amps and I feel like I have ran out of GAS. I have my bass that I love and I really like my amp, so I do not see the need to get anything else. It's kind of a bummer. Has anyone else ran out of GAS?

... that horrible feeling of withdrawal when there's absolutely no need to go to the guitar store for anything...

Other reasons for a pronounced interest in gear have more to do with personal circumstances. Several musicians describe it as a side-effect of boredom, having too much free time or time to bridge between classes or when commuting to work. Occupying oneself with gear and finding out about it on the Internet is much easier than playing when time is scarce. Consequently, GAS-related research is more compatible with family life and a busy work schedule than with practising:

It's a lot easier to obsess over gear than it is to use it, when you have a wife, children, and full time employment. Those hours spent searching those sites are very rare hours.

Hours of playing time are comprised of blocks of minutes when I'm actually at home with my gear, and my wife and children are busy with other things that don't require my presence. The gear hunt takes place on my phone, usually at work or while watching the idiot box with the family, winding down for bed. I still haven't figured out a way to make more time to play that doesn't require sacrificing my time with my loved ones, so I don't flagellate myself over the GAS too much. It just wouldn't [be] fair to myself.

For many years when I had a day gig that took 50 hours a week and I was exhausted the rest of the time I could only play 30 minutes a day on non gig weekdays. So for me I simply could't practice. I filled that void of not getting any better with buying and selling lots of stuff that made me marginally better or worse. Now, 10 years into retirement where I can spend a couple of hours practicing a day I no longer search actively. I see progress on a regular basis and behold all I've had to buy are lessons. But I know from both as a player and a teacher until you can find the time to actually do something to make your playing better sometimes that new mouth-piece/horn/reed/lig/corkgrease seems like a step toward enjoying playing more. Just how it is.

These quotes show that when the time for practising is limited, the occupation with gear at least keeps the hobby alive without neglecting the family (Belk 1995b: 483; Goldberg & Lewis 1978: 94f; Stebbins 2009: 20).

Several posts express the serious conviction that updating equipment helps one progress as a player, which is in line with Stebbins's (2009: 115) assertion that continued investment is indispensable for musicians pursuing a serious leisure career. We have already discussed the widely held belief that musicians associate better gear with better performance (Kwisses 2015; Leonhardt 2015; Wright 2006). The truth of this belief is easy to dismiss from a musical perspective, but this would also disregard the underlying psychological processes that are worth exploring. One musician reasons:

I think a lot of people like going through gear because it feels like progress. It lights up the parts in the brain that give you a sense of accomplishment. Often, it is really more of a distraction from the work it takes to actually become better. I realize that about myself, so I make a conscious effort to counteract that urge. I constantly remind myself that you can be a great musician on a student horn if it works properly, and what is needed is practice and study (work). But if someone likes the gear and it makes them feel good, and they really don't care that much about becoming a better musician, than that's OK. My main advise is try to make sure you are not lying to yourself. I think it is way too easy to justify new gear by thinking 'this is going to help me better my art form'. It think it is healthy to be brutally honest with yourself. Some of us have probably witnessed the dude at a jam on a beat up Bundy blowing circles around guys with \$12,000 of gear hanging from their neck. That is what it's all about.

Especially when there is not much time for practising, musicians understandably turn their attention to their hobby's material side. As the statement indicates, improving the equipment can give a sense of accomplishment and a feeling of progress. Well aware that acquisitions do not make them better players, most musicians nevertheless feel better when they have bought something. However, in many threads, those affected by GAS are accused of their lack of vision or artistic direction. This criticism is commonly related to the unquestioned belief that buying more expensive gear is an improvement regardless of musical needs (Leonhardt 2015). Musicians who join a band often feel the urge to improve their gear, as suggested by these two posts:

I'm finally putting a band together. While listening to songs we think we wanna cover, we figured out that i will need a couple things for these songs. So instead of finding just what i need, i went a little crazy with the wishlist and, well, I'll let it speak for itself..

I was eventually gonna get all this anyway, but being in a band now prompted me to take a closer look at my kit. imma be broke by the time this list is all taken care of.

While the first post indicates that there has been some musical exploration and discussion with band members, the second post suggests that the musician feels compelled to upgrade their drum kit without even having tried it out in practice.

Since GAS overlaps with the practice of collecting, we assumed that collecting would be a frequent topic of discussion in online communities. Our assumption was hardly met, consistent with the general rejection of the term collector observed in the survey and Wright's (2006: 63) distinction between GAS and collecting as different practices. The GAS-related discussions suggest that the understanding of a collector has changed over time. A musician reflects that in the 1970s, anyone who owned more than four guitars was called a collector. Another guitarist adds that when he started collecting 35 years ago, such a habit was not called 'collecting' but 'being nuts'. These accounts indicate that collecting instruments was regarded suspiciously and that common perception has gradually become more liberal, accepting larger equipment collections as normal musical behaviour. This interpretation concurs with Shuker's (2010: 199) finding that record collecting has become less stigmatised over time. Another group of musicians argues that collecting and accumulating gear is the defining criterion of GAS. Collecting and accumulating equipment is considered GAS, while frequently 'flipping' gear should not be regarded as such. The opinions are diverse and do not reflect a clear view. Some musicians do not consider themselves collectors despite owning more than fifteen instruments. Others find that collectors do not necessarily own many items because they 'flip' instruments to upgrade instead of accumulating them. Shuker (2010: 46) shares the opinion that collecting involves acquisition but not necessarily accumulation. The diverging views suggest that equipment size may not be the primary criterion distinguishing players from

collectors. Instead, criteria for selecting and keeping gear and the purpose for its use may define both practices. Musicians who see themselves as players accumulate gear because they do not like to part with items, arguing that they were all bought for a reason, have a history or remind them of notable events or people, which suggests nostalgic motives (Boym 2001; Davis 1979; Pearce 1995; Shuker 2010). Others keep instruments because of their low re-sale value or because they are reluctant to invest the time and energy required to sell instruments. These motivations are different from collecting, defined by a systematic pursuit (McIntosh & Schmeichel 2004; Nordsletten & Mataix-Cols 2012; Nordsletten et al. 2013).

Most threads and posts joke about the positive effects of new gear, but only a few acknowledge its benefits for playing and creativity seriously. Some musicians believe that gear can inspire creativity in line with the concept of ‘facilitation’ (Hartmann 2016: 12), according to which objects provide an infrastructure for doings. These musicians point out that when a plateau is reached in terms of playing technique or songwriting, changing the instrument can help to develop further. For instrumentalists who have the choice to switch from an electric to an acoustic instrument or vice versa, the temporary change can be inspiring. As an electric guitarist elucidates: ‘I have 32 guitars and 80 have passed my hands over the years. Having many choices is inspiring and can lead to lots of creativity, especially if you branch out to other KINDS of guitars like steel string, flattop, classical, flamenco, archtop acoustic, Gypsy jazz, etc.’. Likewise, switching from one model to another within the same category can provide new impulses. Another guitarist explains: ‘Different guitars = more creativity. I find that I play completely different on an Esquire than I do [on] a Les Paul. I tend to try things on one that I would never do on the other. It keeps me interested which helps me be more creative’. For some instruments, the possible variations extend to amplifiers and other devices that afford specific playing styles or give a direction in songwriting (Herbst 2016). The choice of gear ‘sets the scene’ (‘facilitation’), making creativity more likely. However, not only the musical scene is relevant; always having an instrument at hand can also contribute to creativity, as a guitarist points out:

Being surrounded by guitars in every room of the house is nearly a spiritual thing; potential musical resonance everywhere. Even though I have a few favorites, I can pick up any guitar in any room, at any time and bond with it to make the air in the whole house vibrate in organized and interesting ways.

Another common view is that new equipment helps to maintain motivation to practise and play. One guitarist reveals, ‘I really like having different guitars, I usually stick with one for a week or two and then rotate to another, always keeps it fresh’. That may well differ between various types of instruments. While it is easier for guitarists and bassists to switch between instruments and amplifiers because of the relatively small size and affordable price of their equipment, other instrumentalists

may find it more challenging to create variations in their gear collection. Regardless of the individual challenges, creating variation through GAS-related behaviour can build up commitment to music as a hobby and motivate regular practising in times of doubt or crisis (Hartmann 2016: 14).

Consistent with blog entries on GAS (Kwisses 2015; Leonhardt 2015; Power & Parker 2015), many musicians believe that they play better on higher quality equipment. One drummer explains in detail the difference between his beginner set and a higher quality kit purchased later. The sound of the shells was not pleasant, and the cymbals sounded ‘ear piercingly clangly’. Because of the poor sonic quality and feel of the kit, the drummer played more often on a practice pad than on the kit. When he played on his friend’s set, he felt able to be expressive and experiment more. More importantly so, he did not want to stop playing. As he reflects, it took time to become a better player, but with the more pleasant tone and feel he got from playing with better gear, he began to realise his potential. Such joy resulted in improved skills. Purchasing a better drum kit enhanced his motivation and practice routine, which over time made him a better musician. Another drummer similarly stated that by replacing the stock snare of his kit with a better instrument, he realised how sensitive snare drums could be. As he further explains, the ‘less mud factor was definitely inspiring and being able to hear ghost notes, made me feel better about my playing’. Furthermore, re-cutting the bearing edges on the drum set and switching from double to single-ply heads reduced the muffled sound and motivated him to improve his double-stroke roll technique. Still another drummer likewise stresses that having ‘round, pure, perfectly tuned, unmuffled notes that sing out with nice sustain’ affects his playing, arguing that

The tone of the toms are just as vital as the notes I choose. When I do tom work, I rely on sustain and a note. That’s what I’m hearing in my head. I love it, I want it, lots of it, and need it. If I play a kit with no sustain, like the typical done to death dead splat... my tom ideas... don’t work at all, so I use the toms as little as possible on a kit that sounds like that.

A player specifies that such positive effects of better gear do not make a musician play better *per se*, but that it makes them *sound* better. The distinction between better sound and better playing is significant in the context of GAS, as many musicians equate a better sound with better playing. Better gear can indeed sound better, but it requires playing skills, and the better they are, the better the equipment’s potential can be utilised. That playing skills are regarded as necessary to utilise an instrument’s potential shows in threads asking about the perfect time to upgrade a rig.

Even though new equipment might increase motivation and improve tone, several posts highlight that changing gear can have a detrimental effect on musical development because instruments have ‘learning curves’. One keyboardist emphasises that good synthesisers require considerable experimentation before their potential

can be harnessed, and the time ‘worrying about the mechanics of managing the instrument rather than evaluating if it has quality sounds’ may not be spent ‘practising’. Similarly, guitarists argue that switching gear ‘can actually impair your progress’ and therefore recommend sticking with a setup for several years. While they acknowledge that the affordances of gear challenge a player to develop their skills when the setup is changed, the best approach for optimal progress would be to ‘own the right guitars/amps at the right time in your growth as a guitarist’. Saxophonists discuss the optimal mouthpiece in detail. Although many players change them frequently due to their affordability, it is stressed that experience and learning success dictate which mouthpiece should be used to match the playing level. Furthermore, saxophone models differ in their degree of difficulty to play, and specific techniques must be acquired or refined to play specific models. This requirement potentially defines the point at which a new instrument should be purchased by linking time to practice and learning success. Other instruments such as guitar, bass or drums tend to facilitate playing techniques or genres, but generally, models do not differ in their level of difficulty to play.

7.2.3 Emotions and Psychological States

Emotions are at the heart of GAS, as they motivate and follow acquisitive behaviour. In the context of collecting and consumption, we discussed pathological behaviours related to the use of musical equipment. The online discussions show that GAS is sometimes considered a common and ‘incurable, contagious disease’, which ‘can result in acute psychosis’.

We have previously highlighted that the tone generally becomes more serious when spending patterns indicate that community members are financing their gear purchases through loans or willingly accept other financial problems to fund their musical practices. Related consequences like withdrawal from personal relationships or not paying everyday bills are symptoms of a pathological condition (Goldberg & Lewis 1978: 94f). This danger is quite real for GAS-afflicted musicians and can quickly turn into a vicious circle, as this example illustrates:

I’ve come to the realization lately that GAS isn’t really a logical thing. The endless search for tones seems to derive from consumerism and a need for novelty. I know I have everything I need gear-wise. I’d have everything I need with much less gear. But I always end up cruisin’ Reverb and eBay, or walking through Guitar Center, GASing for some new thing. Problem is, I can’t really afford it most of the time. I have to sell stuff to fund new things, but of course you can’t always sell something for what you paid for it, so it’s still a steady loss of money when you buy gear. I also end up realizing I want pedals back that I sold. So sometimes I end up buying a pedal again that I sold at a loss before. The truth is, if I had more money, I’d keep all my pedals, and probably have a cool music room with shelves for them. But that’s not the case. Fellow broke people, how do you manage GAS?

Typical responses to such posts are these two:

There is an awful lot of FOMO [fear of missing out] in these purchases and behaviour. I recognise that in myself when I find myself obsessing over a piece of gear. I'm not saying I've never experienced pathological GAS feelings, cos I have, but financially, I've never gone too far. Truth is, you don't NEED any of it. You might like it, love it, want it, use it, value it or be obsessed by it, but you don't NEED any of it. None of it will fill a hole in your life for a meaningful time. You probably need to go cold turkey to realise this ... it's actually a serious topic, and some people here really need help. You are sounding like one of those.

Jesus people. If you have credit card debt you shouldn't be buying anything aside from what you need to live. It's a trap. Make an austere budget, stick to it, get yourself debt free, sort it out, you will have far more money for fun stuff in the future that way. Not being holier than thou, trying to help!

The discussions attempt to identify the reasons for an irrational urge to acquire gear. There is broad consensus that GAS may be a distraction from other problems and a symptom of underlying problems in many cases. Several musicians reflect that GAS could be a scapegoat for other issues, that if it were not GAS, something else would take its place. There are also arguments suggesting that in the hope of happiness (Belk et al. 2003; Wright 2006: 22), material possessions fill a void in life. In most cases, however, acquisitions only give 'you a little dopamine hit and gets you excited for a minute and then you get bored and want something else'. It is a momentary pleasure but not long-lasting satisfaction (Shuker 2010: 111; Stebbins 2009: 21). The psychological complexity becomes visible from this musician's reflection:

For me, the key was understanding that ... GAS wasn't really about gear. It was about escape, distraction, and loneliness. When I feel anxious or depressed, looking at and buying gear provides a little bit of relief by distracting me and giving my mind something to focus on. Also, when I feel lonely, I sometimes feel that if I could have really cool gear, I would be more accepted by people, and I would feel more connected with others. The problem is that looking at and buying gear doesn't resolve any of these issues, and it can be big waste of resources. Understanding this and dealing with the deeper issues directly has allowed me to get better at seeing GAS for what it is, which has given it a lot less power over me.

The post alludes to several potential psychological problems, but the main one concerns social acceptance and company. Extensive engagement in an online community may hint at a lack of offline social networks, and once the newcomer is accepted into the community, a gear-obsessive behaviour is expected, which in turn promotes (superficial) social bonds. This behaviour is reflective of 'desire for sociality' (Belk et al. 2003; Formanek 1991), whereby the desire for material objects is motivated by the hope of facilitating social relations, either to gain access to a social group or to maintain it.

In the context of desire, we have looked at impulsive buying, which appears to be characteristic of medium to strong GAS. The message boards confirm the frequent occurrence of impulsive acquisitions. Several threads are explicitly dedicated to sharing experiences of impulsive buying. In the overwhelming majority, the related posts show regret about the irrational and sudden purchase, which reflects impulsive and compulsive buying (Faber & O'Guinn 1989; Faber & Vohs, 2004; Garcia 2007; Lo & Harvey 2011, 2012; McElroy et al. 1991, 1994). Impulsive acquisitions are generally sold or traded at a loss, or they are kept but not used for many years until they are finally sold. Reasons for spontaneous acquisitions comprise strong, often visual attraction, bargains or the curiosity to try out something new (Wright 2006: 28ff, 38ff). In many cases, the items proved useless in musical practice, or the musicians were so accustomed to their current setup that they did not want to change it. To counteract impulsive behaviour, a musician recommends committing to keep equipment, making one consider acquisitions more carefully. Another board member refrains from new purchases until having played their current gear extensively, which reaffirms to them that it satisfies their needs and does not require any improvements. Apart from this confirmation, the additional waiting time helps to reduce the impulsive urge. Such behaviour is a strategy described in anti-consumption research (Black & Cherrier 2010; Lee et al. 2011). A further musician has made good experiences with 'setting gear goals' and saving towards them, preventing impulsive acquisitions when managing to remain disciplined.

A small number of threads discusses GAS as a form of 'Obsessive Compulsive Disorder' (OCD) without a consensus. Some users speculate that 'chasing tone' is 'chasing dopamine' in disguise and may therefore not be 'much different than compulsive gambling or sex addiction'. A professional therapist challenges this hypothesis, arguing:

If there is a link I believe it to be quite small. Especially if we are talking true OCD. OCD as it reaches clinical levels tends to reek havoc on creativity. Creative types certainly have their quirks but they generally dont have true OCD. They may have a few traits but a true OCD individual tends to be a concrete thinker and is far too wrapped up in their own world to seek answers through change. If an OCD individual happened to play saxophone the last thing he or she would want to do is change gear. That would be an invitation to chaos. Change=Pain.

Another forum member supports this view, emphasising that OCD is an anxiety disorder. Since affected people do not cope well with change, they do not continuously feel the urge to buy and update their setup. Some musicians see a stronger link between GAS and 'Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder' (ADHD) because impulsiveness and short attention spans favour occupation with gear over long-term and potentially tedious practice. One drummer shares:

often I find myself in the middle of practicing, say, paradiddles around the kit and wondering how another crash or ride would sound, stopping what I'm doing to replace for no need or reason at all. I'm a gear hoarder. And I'm ADHD. And I'm compulsive. It's a bad combination. I need help.

The few posts do not allow further theorisation, and proper investigation would require psychological and psychiatric research into the connections between GAS, OCD and ADHD. However, research describing a neurological link between OCD and ADHD (Brem et al. 2014) indicates that musicians affected by one or both conditions may be more susceptible to GAS.

A small number of posts refer to 'hoarding disorder' (American Psychiatric Association 2013; Nordsletten & Mataix-Cols 2012). Although it is not clear how serious these 'confessions' are, some seem to be genuine. A representative example is this statement:

GAS took me for a ride for a couple years. I just couldn't turn down a deal. I was on CL [Craigslist] 10-20 times a day. I was buying and selling like a madman. I was looking in nearby cities, travelling out of my way, having stuff shipped across the country. It was a problem. I would try something new for a little bit and then the next piece would come along and I would sell the old. It wasn't until I started collecting a bunch of stuff that I was able to really beat it. I had gear all over the house with no place to hide it. I started using amps for furniture and hanging sh/t on the walls as 'art'. Then one day when the family was away, I sat down with my mountain of crap and started really A/Bing stuff with a critical ear. It became very apparent that a lot of stuff that I really liked and thought I would own forever just wasn't as good as some other item. It was tough to let go of some of it because I really believed it was unique and I would never find another. I was 'collecting' stuff for the sake of having it not because I needed it or would ever find time to actually use it.

The post demonstrates a mild case of hoarding that the individual could solve on their own without external help, but it still shows the mental struggles that an obsession with gear involves (Nordsletten & Mataix-Cols 2012; Nordsletten et al. 2013). Other musicians believe that hoarders disguise themselves as collectors and justify their accumulations with a 'purpose'. The posts show varying degrees of compulsion and intentions regarding the accumulation of gear, which supports our previous considerations that a considerable number of GAS-affected musicians are on the spectrum between unproblematic collecting and compulsive hoarding.

Reactions to observed compulsive behaviours are quite different. Some see compulsive patterns but either consider them harmless or justify them with reasonable arguments, for example, by stressing it is an affordable hobby or by outlining the benefits of owning much gear. Others intend to improve their behaviour when they

observe compulsive traits because they regard it as comparable to addiction in gambling, shopping or alcohol. Therefore, some threads describe ‘going broke’ as a positive moment in a musician’s life in the long run. One player expresses:

Late last year, I was blessed to go broke. It didn’t seem like a blessing at the time, but it put the brakes on a very unhealthy obsession with gear. In the ensuing time, I’ve come to realize that GAS is very much like the legend of the lotus-eaters as told in the Odyssey. It’s a dangerous addiction that can permanently derail you if you’re not careful.

When the money runs out, the musician is forced to reflect and change their behaviour. For some individuals, this external pressure seems to be necessary to break the GAS circle and develop a healthier relationship with their musical practice, one that emphasises playing over equipment.

Another frequent topic in discussions related to GAS is ‘unhappiness’. Many musicians feel that too many instruments are a burden because they need to be stored and maintained. Some players feel compelled to upgrade their instruments, which can become a separate hobby; the time is then spent on crafting instead of practising (Becker 1996). Some even find the thought of owning many instruments stressful, feeling it would pressure them to play each one regularly. Not giving each instrument equal attention would lead to feelings of guilt. The dispensable instruments may end up hanging on the walls, which for some would be a daily reminder of the mismatch between their gear and playing, causing psychological stress. That is why a few musicians emphasise that they used to be happier when they did not have so much equipment and instead concentrated on their playing. Others highlight that with a smaller collection, they could have ‘richer relationships and experiences’ with their equipment. Several musicians report feeling better when ‘thinning out the herd’.

7.2.4 Mitigations and Cures for GAS

On music boards, GAS is expected behaviour, but it is still treated ambiguously. This ambiguity is reflected in the discourse, in which about half of the posts encourage GAS-related habits, whereas the other half discuss mitigations for GAS. The exchange is characterised by the assertion that GAS cannot be permanently cured, at least not when music is a primary hobby. Redirecting a serious leisure career (Stebbins 2009) to another discipline is seen as the most promising approach to reduce or stop music-related GAS, which, however, bears the risk of developing a desire for something else. It is obviously not a cure for those who wish to continue being musicians. With another hobby that is not a substitute for music-making, principles and strategies can at least mitigate the effects of GAS. The most common advice is to avoid possible temptations from message boards, social media gear channels, musicians’ magazines, music stores, equipment-related videos and websites such as Craigslist and eBay, arguing that ‘if you want to cure it, then just stop feeding

the beast'. Abstinence reduces temptations and prevents musicians from discovering and becoming familiar with new items, which also effectively prevents these objects from becoming a necessity (Braun et al. 2016). Accordingly, meetings with fellow 'gear heads' in the 'real world' should be limited and instead, contact with musicians focused on playing be sought. Comparing one's gear and tone with other musicians is also to be avoided because the exchange of ideas and photos of personal setups besides gear envy are key motivators for GAS, in line with research on collecting (McIntosh & Schmeichel 2004; Shuker 2010) and consumption (Belk 1988; Belk et al. 2003; Tuan 1980) highlighting social competitiveness and status resulting from the strong connection between possessions and identity. Another recommendation to resist the temptation of buying new gear, or at least to delay it, is to explore the potential of equipment already owned by experimentation and research, such as reading the manual, watching videos and searching for advice on how to use it. Still another strategy to avoid impulsive buying is to write a wish list for gear to be bought in the future in the hope of 'eventually outgrowing' it (Wright 2006: 33) or that 'logic will take over' (Dholakia et al. 2018). Such an approach will not stop the feelings of GAS altogether, but it may lead to a continuous cycle of desires (Belk et al. 2003), which is favourable in that it starts anew before equipment is bought. Acquisitions and their negative consequences are prevented, next to promoting healthy consumer behaviour, characterised by reflecting on the individual economic position and taking a reasoned decision (Hoch & Loewenstein 1991).

Belk et al. (2003: 343) argue that hope is crucial for any desire to develop and be sustained. Some musicians depicted good experiences with deliberately desiring 'impossible purchases' to avoid gear-related spending:

Without curing it, it's actually fairly easy to abate. All you need to do is make sure that you are gassing for something that you can't possibly afford. Right now, I am longing for either a new Benedetto or a D'Angelico New Yorker [guitar] made by John. It will be a long, long time before I could think of getting one, but focusing on that makes GAS have zero effect.

Set your GAS to trigger only on unrealistically expensive, 12k+ instruments.

Now you start GASSing for an Alembic Classic [bass] worth 30k. You spend lots of time listening to samples, watching pics, documentaries, you stalk the builders around, and know you'll never be able to afford one.

All these recommendations focus on controlling the psychological urge by either avoiding temptation or redirecting it to something unattainable, strategies discussed in anti-consumption research (Dholakia 2015; Hoch & Loewenstein 1991; Montoya & Scott 2013; Myrseth et al. 2009; Redden & Haws 2013; Siemens & Kopp 2011).

One of the main problems of GAS is that an 'unreasonable' amount of money is spent on luxury items not needed. The discussions show that many musicians see

the solution to this problem in the decision to make purchases only with money earned through music.

My GAS cure came when I reduced down to two amps and three guitars... then told myself ANY new gear I purchased would be bought with gig money... and ONLY gig money.

Music has never been my primary source of income, but I have been making at least a modest profit from music every year since 2008. I can't justify gear purchases otherwise.

So for the part-time musician with a full time job these gigs are not too bad. They have paid for all of my equipment over the years and have allowed me to fuel my Gear Acquisition Syndrome (GAS) with out dipping into my family money. I have a hobby that is self-sustaining.

As the statements demonstrate, observing this principle can alleviate either the adverse financial consequences of GAS or the psychological burden associated with it. Similarly, many musicians have made it a rule to realise their desire for experimentation with new gear through trading ('flipping') or selling owned equipment so that the collection neither grows nor requires substantial investment.

Personally, I think that experimenting with new gear can be really fun and inspiring, but it's pretty easy to become caught up in it to the point that it becomes compulsive and distracting. I like to change things up once in a while, but I do it by maintaining a constant net investment in gear. That means that if I want to get something new, I first have to sell something that I currently own. Most of what I currently own works well for me, and so I rarely feel motivated enough to go through the hassle of trying to get something new.

I have a rule that I (mostly) stick to that says if I buy something I have to sell something, so they don't pile up. 90% of what I buy is used as well.

I justify new GAS by flipping out redundant guitar gear to give way for new or better GAS. I may have disposed gems I may no longer be having or can still have but have to pay way more than how much I got it but my present GAS won't be where it is now if those transactions didn't push through.

Another strand of discussions does not revolve around strategies and principles that can be applied proactively but instead around constraints that inevitably limit the effects of GAS. Some musicians highlight that becoming older entailed lower ambitions and desires for new gear because the urge has waned, or the rational mind has made it hard for them to justify spending money on unneeded equipment. However, this does not seem true for anyone because posts of musicians over 60 or 70 years prove otherwise, still performing on stage several times a month. By their accounts, they reduced their instrument collection, prioritising a few good-sounding and versatile instruments that are easy to transport and set up on stage. There are yet others

like a 71-year-old guitarist who has been playing since 1957, arguing that GAS will never disappear. Although having all the instruments he ever wanted and being completely satisfied with his current collection, he reports recently having spent \$6,200 on new gear ‘just because something new pops up’. Likely, musicians who have always been prone to GAS will keep to their habits when they get older, and those who have always prioritised their playing will do so even more as they age. This ambiguous observation is consistent with research not being able to confirm a clear link between age and financial decision-making, including impulsive buying (Bangma et al. 2017). As they get older, musicians are more likely to prioritise those aspects of their hobby that interest them the most, be it gear or playing.

Another constraint is limited space, even though the discussions do not clarify how effective it is in mitigating GAS. The posts suggest that limited space reduces GAS only temporarily, as it does not change the root of the behaviour. In contrast, financial constraints are much more effective, although also tackling the symptoms only. The lack of disposable income is one of the main involuntary financial constraints that naturally limits GAS-related spending. There are countless posts like these:

The one and only way to cure GAS is to go completely broke. Works wonders.

Usually not having money makes it really easy for me to not spend it.

When I'm poor (which is most of the time) it's easy to manage GAS. If there's no money, there's no way I can buy anything—so BAM! When I have money... that's when it's hard to manage the GAS.

NO MONEY! That's the only thing that has stopped me. I have seen so many deals lately. I surely would have pulled the trigger on at least one of them. The only thing that has stopped me has been lack of money. So, if you want to finally get rid of your addiction, go broke! Problem solved.

Being broke only cures the ‘Acquisition’ part of GAS... it doesn't stop me from GAssing.

As the last post suggests, lack of money, just like lack of space, does not stop GAS but makes indulgent equipment purchases less likely. However, a severe financial crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic seems to reduce GAS significantly, which can be seen in respective discussions about its consequences like furlough and redundancy. Representative statements include: ‘Here's something to cure your GAS. Say you get furloughed or let go. The wages stop coming in. Can't eat a bass, can you?’, ‘Due to the lockdown, my short scale GAS seems to have abated’. These statements highlight that GAS is a luxury problem that most likely affects musicians from affluent societies and the middle and upper classes.

A final kind of remedy, the most effective one as per Becker (1996) and Wright (2006), is being in a serious relationship or marriage. Apart from the partner critically

evaluating excess purchases, children are a strong motivation for many musicians not to spend money unnecessarily on music equipment:

My ‘gear acquisition syndrome’ has been replaced with the ‘getting kids through college headache’.

Putting two kids through college has pretty much cured my GAS.

Getting married pretty much ended my GAS ... But seriously, get married to a sensible Women who is good with money ... have 3 kids and you’ll never see an expensive bit of guitar gear passing through your door again. Solved—No more GAS!

Belk (1995b: 483) describes that family members may regard collections of obsessive collectors as rivals. The exemplary posts demonstrate that the family is positioned above equipment, suggesting a still healthy dealing with gear. Shifting the focus to a new relationship is seen as another way to avoid GAS, even if this is only a temporary cure.

Another kind of mitigation can be classified as ‘realisations’. Some musicians recognise through more experience that most gear sounds relatively similar if one takes the time to examine and compare it properly (Crowdy 2013). Realising that alternative models are essentially quite similar seems to be an effective way for moderately GAS-affected musicians, who justify acquisitions by their musical use or need, to reduce the frequency of purchases. Likewise, many musicians acknowledge that there is no perfect rig or that it would not improve their playing unless it were significantly better than that they currently use. Some players recognise there is no such thing as the ‘perfect tone’ and state that they would settle for a ‘great tone’ while others realise that their playing would always sound like them regardless of the equipment played. For electric guitarists, it can be enlightening to study classical guitar, as it ‘is all about technique and musicianship between hands and instrument, everything comes from the player—no “gear” involved’. Related to other electric instruments, several musicians report they have realised that simple setups usually sound better than complex ones, which makes sense from a technical viewpoint because extensive processing and unnecessary cable connections easily diminish audio quality (Välimäki & Reiss 2016).

Observing other players can also lead to helpful realisations. Like the previous recommendation to appreciate the current rig’s quality, musicians highlight that hearing it played by a fellow musician helps them realise how good it sounds. Likewise, some GAS-minded musicians, who tend to value idols that use complex setups, realise that their GAS can be reduced by listening to other renowned musicians with great tone produced with simple rigs:

Many pro’s gig with boards that are way cheaper and smaller than TGP ‘bedroom player’ boards... Just sayin’. You don’t need a massive board filled with boutique pedals to get great tones. Practice > pedals.

GAS can be cured by watching and listening to great musicians performing gloriously with totally uncool gear.

I cure GAS by watching rig rundowns of the biggest players in the industry, playing with 3 boss pedals in a standard direct from the store marshall/fender, and all of a sudden, my 29 pedal board feels ridiculous and i think of selling it all to get a blues driver and a delay and be happy.

This world of unlimited gear excess is at best a fantasy world for most people. Robin Trower has used fender hotrods and stock Marshalls for ever.

Besides, didn't I know that Yngwie Malmsteen shreds on a guitar with a medium action, just like mine has? Yngwie Malmsteen has a guitar just like, or perhaps even worse than, mine. But plays like a God. Hence it cannot be the guitar that is holding me back, for otherwise, it would have held Yngwie back too, but that is obviously not the case.

The previous survey of community members found evidence that role models do not influence musicians in their acquisitions much. But what role models usually do is teach the regular musician that playing matters and not the equipment. Likewise, some musicians who perform live have realised that the audience either does not care about the gear they are playing or may not even be able to tell the difference. In this sense, it is also stressed that good songs do not require perfect sound to be appreciated by the audience.

Another set of realisations revolves around 'becoming a better musician'. A common recommendation to counteract GAS is to remember why one started playing in the first place: 'Think about, meditate upon, and reflect on why you wanted to play guitar in the first place. Was it to acquire gear?' The discussions suggest that many musicians follow a similar development. When they started making music, they enjoyed playing and practising on entry-level instruments. Over time, their interest shifted to gear, either as part of their musical exploration or as a consequence of losing the motivation to practise, when the initial enthusiasm for the new hobby has been waning and musical progress slowing down. Shifting the focus to the musical purpose of leisure activity is considered an effective means to limit the urge to buy new gear. Likewise, most musicians agree that playing their current rig is 'the best GAS killer' and that practice will help them utilise its full potential.

I went through a period of gear obsessiveness about 5 years ago, during which I bought and sold a lot of guitars. As is the usual pattern, I was getting back into the guitar in a serious way after many years of only casual playing. The gear acquisition syndrome did indeed siphon away a lot of time that would have been better spent on the fretboard. But then, after I had some gear I was reasonably happy with, the gear fixation subsided and I started spending a minimum of 4+ hours a day in serious study. Only then did any of the sexy gear bear fruit. For me, gear acquisition without the accompanying practice time is displacement behavior, and I will never allow myself to go there again. My motto is that no more than 5% of my 'guitar

time' can be spent on gear (research, purchase, repair...), forums, etc. And yes, I keep track of it.

I decided long ago that more or better gear would not make me a better player. I downsized all my equipment, Drums, Bass and Guitar to the minimum I need to play, and I spend my time and effort on playing, experimenting with tuning's, and writing some songs for fun, and recording. I now spend no time wishing and looking and hoping for a better drum or guitar, and spend my time getting the maximum out of what I have. I have not even scratched the surface yet.

It is often suggested that taking lessons contributes to musical improvement and spending music-related money on something 'sensible' while reducing GAS: 'I find nothing kills GAS more efficiently than lessons with an inspiring teacher'. Keeping busy with musical projects can help. While bands can be a motivator for GAS, they can also draw attention to songwriting, recording and performing music, thus avoiding occupation with GAS out of boredom.

My cure for gas is to focus on writing, recording and gigging. Leaves me with no time to really go out and buy stuff.

When I play live, I become more satisfied with what I have, focus more on working with it than on replacing it, and understand more that few of the 'upgrades' I've obsessed over have made a damn bit of difference.

The best cure for Gas for me was getting out and playing in a band again! Made me focus on playing the music. Learning and writing new songs. When I spent a few years not getting out and playing with others I spent far to[o] much time compensating for the real thing by buying material stuff.

The respective threads discuss whether GAS is the most widespread amongst 'bed-room players', yet the conversations do not come to a definite conclusion. It seems that although gigging musicians like to buy new gear, its use is tested in real-world situations until a rig that works best is found, thereby reducing the urge for further acquisitions.

A considerable number of posts from players claiming to have learned to control GAS indicate that they have found their 'perfect rig'. This realisation resembles Cole's (2018: 1060) solution for GAS by focusing on the setup's 'use-value', which is not an inherent property of objects but defined by individual musical needs. The perfect rig can take various forms. Many musicians have noticed that they are most satisfied with a minimalist setup. However, this realisation often requires years of experimentation with instruments to finally determine what gear works best for the musicians' playing styles.

I'm here to honestly say out loud that after almost 10 years of compulsively checking the classifieds, eBay, and Reverb almost every waking hour for the next thing that would get me 'my tone' or 'that sound' that I am finally GAS free and it feels f***ing awesome. It wasn't cheap or easy... pretty painful at points dealing with

builds, bad sellers, shipping companies, girls who couldn't believe that pickups and preamps were more interesting than them, etc + all of the other trial(s) by fire along the way. I finally have the bass, board, amp, cables, strings and everything else to get the perfect sounds I've always wanted. Looking forward to spending more time playing than shopping, jonesin' and flipping! For me-the biggest steps were committing to have one bass, one board and one amp setup with a backup bass+amp at most. Using custom cut pain-in-the-butt patch cables forced me to stick to a setup and see it through. Rather than having a studio full of variety I set out to trim the fat and have the best possible rig.

Many posts suggest that one or two high-quality instruments work better than a medium-sized collection. However, it is up to the personal assessment of what setup is suited for one's style or offers the greatest versatility. Either setup can be effective in reducing GAS long-term. Getting to this point, however, requires not only experimentation but also the budget to afford it. It takes years for most musicians to gradually upgrade their equipment by selling gear and buying better equipment with continuous investment, sometimes referred to as 'horse-trading'. This gradual improvement, achieved through learning, reflecting and investing money, is characteristic of a serious leisure career (Stebbins 2009) and may last decades or even a lifetime. Furthermore, several posts suggest that the perfect rig or the opportunity to experiment with all the desired gear during the leisure career can effectively alleviate GAS. A variation of 'perfect rig mitigation' is building the perfect instrument in the act of craft consumption (Campbell 2005; Cole 2018) because it makes stock models uninteresting. The commission of custom-made instruments is discussed much less than DIY, but it serves the same purpose.

The vast majority of those satisfied with their rig still note that GAS will never disappear completely. Notwithstanding rarely having the strong urge to buy, those players' interest in gear does not wane, which is similar to collecting. A collection either is never-ending or, once it is complete, another one will be started (McIntosh & Schmeichel 2004; Shuker 2010; Straw 2000). If musicians suffer from GAS, the most effective strategy for alleviation is a combination of principles and shifts in mindset. Principles help control the financial burden by delaying the immediate impulse to buy, leading to more purposeful acquisitions. A change of mindset shifting the focus from gear to playing appears most promising to reduce GAS effectively and permanently. The ultimate goal is a rig that meets all musical requirements and matches the level of playing. Getting there, however, usually takes years of GAS; one must find out what gear works best and build up the purchasing power to afford the right setup, which will rarely be entry-level equipment. It seems that for many players, GAS is an integral aspect of the learning process and musical expertise, which eventually leads to a more fulfilling serious leisure career and better musical results unless the musical development is hampered by the interest in gear in that it takes away from practising and meaningful musical projects.

7.3 Discussion

The analysis of virtual communities was motivated to extend the survey results by further explanatory insights and to deepen and consolidate the previous interdisciplinary theoretical deliberations on GAS. Following the overarching framework of 'Communities of Practice' (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) proved helpful, and the three dimensions defined by Wenger (1998: 73–83) were met in our investigation. The various message boards shared unwritten rules, knowledge and norms ('mutual engagement'), they referred to other boards and offline practices ('joint enterprise'), and they produced a joint discourse characterised by routines, events, habits, stories, jargon and jokes ('shared repertoire'). Although all three dimensions include GAS, it does not constitute itself in the communities, except for equipment-centred groups like The Gear Page and Gearslut, where GAS is a central part of the community discourse. As the analysis has shown, knowledge about GAS is expected, and one must adhere by learning and continuously updating one's rig to function effectively in the community. GAS is discussed in dedicated threads and mentioned in non-GAS themed conversations as a 'running gag', and the term is also used to warn members when their obsession with gear shows signs of going too far. Playing an instrument is the overarching hobby that at times is hard to maintain, especially when an excessive interest in gear replaces music-making or when work, family life or other hobbies do not leave enough time to practise. A keen interest in gear is generally viewed positively as long as it is a conscious decision and not an excuse or distraction for those wishing to advance as players.

Irrespective of the relative importance of playing and gear for the individual, musicians may benefit from GAS in their learning process and socialisation in the communities. Most musicians are curious to experiment with equipment and see it as a way to advance musically. Through purchases of new gear or 'flipping' to modify or upgrade the rig, continuous acquisition accompanies musical development. Only when there is a mismatch between playing and GAS or when musicians buy equipment on credit is GAS generally considered a problem. It is usually a shared joke and treated with humour. Having GAS is part of the community identity, and members compete over the level of affliction. A closer look at the discourse, however, reveals a more serious engagement with gear. Many musicians are aware of the risks of unhealthy behaviours and thus monitor their practices. They accept GAS as an integral part of their leisure career, which, on the one side, is linked to musical progress, motivation and practice, and on the other side is due to plain boredom and lacks purpose and direction. Musically, not being involved in meaningful projects can fuel GAS, as the examples of 'bedroom musicians' have shown. Conversely, musical projects can stimulate GAS in the endeavour to maximise the results of the

venture. Often, GAS seems to be a symptom of other feelings, motivations or struggles within the leisure career and of the person in general. As such, GAS is a proxy for something else.

The observed practices differ from studies that examined comparable forums for music producers. Both kinds of communities focus on equipment but vary in the degree of importance they attach to its use. The discourse on forums for music producers is characterised by strong competition and social hierarchy. Ownership of analogue devices distinguishes privileged community members, those with more economic or social capital like participants from more affluent societies (Hesmondhalgh 1998) or industry professionals (Carvalho 2012; Cole 2011; Crowdy 2013; Kaiser 2017; O’Grady 2019; A. Williams 2015). Apart from mere ownership, the use of equipment brings about an even greater differentiation within the communities. That is why becoming part of the social elite requires more than ownership and knowledge of privileged equipment. As Cole (2011) highlights, audio professionals often expose hobbyists or semi-professional ‘prosumers’ (professional consumers) by their inability to utilise the potential afforded by prestigious gear to demonstrate social capital. Such exposure is based on assessment and discussion of user-generated work. Similarly, Porcello (2004) and Carvalho (2012) find that language distinguishes ambitious amateur and semi-professional recording engineers and producers from professionals, for example, when discussing gear and engineering techniques.

The musicians’ boards are far less competitive. New acquisitions are celebrated regardless of the musical necessity and status, experience or expertise of the musician. How it is used is not overly important; it is the process of acquisition that matters, for example, the successfully overcome psychological struggle to part with an instrument to make space for the new equipment or to strike a particularly good bargain. The pleasure comes from the acquisition irrespective of whether the level of playing justifies it. In only very few of the observed GAS-related threads, buyers can be seen posting audio or video recordings where they play the new equipment to demonstrate and discuss its musical use.⁴⁰ Is musical necessity ever questioned, then usually by the buyers themselves in their self-assessment. The level of professional-

⁴⁰ Unboxing videos, of which there is a vast amount on YouTube, are rarely posted in GAS-related threads. The reason is not clear; there may be separate communities on other platforms such as YouTube itself or other social media, where the groups are more interactive and focused on photos and audio-visual media.

ism is irrelevant; musicians participate in the community because of the joy of making music or dealing with gear. There are no strong indications of rivalry or belittlement resulting from social hierarchies or attempts to gain status.⁴¹

Compared to forums for music producers, communities for musicians are collegial. The members enjoy their ‘guilty pleasure’ together because equipment would be much less enjoyable if the pleasures were not shared with peers. One musician highlights in their introduction to a GAS-related thread that ‘these threads are always good fun (and surprisingly educational)’. The two components, fun and education, seem to be at the centre of GAS. Musicians delight in experimenting with gear and sharing their experiences. At the same time, the way of using it is decisive as to whether gear hampers or facilitates musical development since it accompanies growing expertise. For a player of popular music, knowledge of equipment and how to use it best is essential. Equipment will not replace playing skills and musical intuition, but it is a tool that both requires and facilitates musical expression.

⁴¹ Although there are no strong indications of a social hierarchy, the communities show a gender imbalance with an overrepresentation of male members. In general, they accept female musicians, but the frequent occurrence of sexist expressions may still discourage non-male musicians, making these communities a mainly male-dominated space.