The Fake, the Forgery and the Frankenstein

A thematic analysis on the negotiation of value and legitimacy of World War II Nazi memorabilia, and what this reveals about the boundaries between history, and authenticity in online communities.

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Abstract

This study investigates how collectors of Nazi militaria from the Second World War II negotiate questions of authenticity, legitimacy, and value in an online forum setting dedicated to military collectibles. Although the objects themselves are tied to a dark history, they continue to circulate in private collections, outside of institutional oversight. Based on a thematic analysis of 52 forum threads with over 600 user comments, alongside interviews and participant observation, this research reveals how value and authenticity are not fixed attributes but outcomes of social interaction and collective judgment. Forum users engage in practices that resemble forensic analysis mostly based on reference books, yet they rely heavily on peer recognition, and community norms. The findings show that expertise is performed and earned through repeated participation and mentorship. Users co-produce standards through informal policing and boundary work, creating a hierarchy where some voices carry more weight than others. The study further identifies a typology of inauthentic items frequently encountered in forum discussion, being reproductions, forgeries, fantasy pieces and Frankenstein hybrids. Each have a distinct moral and historical relevance and moreover, this classification influences the value. It also shows how collectors respond to a shifting market, where German militaria is slowly becoming a speculative commodity. The findings challenge traditional notions of heritage and expertise by showing how cultural memory and historical value are actively assembled in online communities. The study contributes to broader sociological conversations about heritage, material culture, and the role of online communities in this.

Keywords: Nazi militaria, Authenticity, Collecting culture, Online forums, Forum Dynamics, Value negotiation, World War II

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Introduction

This year marks 80 years since the liberation of the Netherlands, and with each passing year, fewer people remain who can speak first-hand about the events of the Second World War. Yet as the living memory fades, the material remnants of that time continue to circulate in both private and public collections. Items such as medals, daggers, uniforms, insignia and documents are traded, studied and displayed by collectors. In the field of collecting, German militaria from World War II is increasing in its worth. This is not solely because there are simply no new items that can be created, but also because the interest for that historic period is bigger than ever seen before, says endowed professor of Popular Historical Culture, Kees Ribbens (Van der Veen, 2021). This fascination with WWII is fueled by moral dilemmas, spectacle, and the war's temporal proximity. Authentic elements such as eyewitness accounts and physical relics enhance the experience (Ribbens, 2014, pp. 91–92). The Second World War continues to hold immense cultural relevance. It persists in what Assmann and Czaplicka (1995) describe as "cultural memory" which is a shared framework in which societies remember and interpret the past. This form of memory, especially when situated within a "limited temporal horizon" of around 80 to 100 years (p. 127), maintains emotional resonance and symbolic power. Within this context, German militaria becomes more than material culture, it becomes a carrier of meaning, generating both interest and controversy.

This research sets out to discover the ways the negotiation of value and legitimacy of these objects are negotiated in an online collectors' forum setting. Through a thematic analysis, the patterns that are developed reveal the boundaries between history, and authenticity in online communities.

As Harrison (2013) notes, heritage is not merely about saving remnants of the past, but about actively selecting and interpreting objects that reflect values societies wish to carry into the future (p. 4). The civilian of today is not a passive receiver, but an active participant in historic culture (Ribbens, 2014, p. 90). Given discourse in media and society, the way of preserving Nazi memorabilia is under constant scrutiny. The museum context is socially acceptable, but the private owners are frowned upon and receive accusations of ideological glorification. Within online forums, users navigate this tension by invoking historical objectivity. They rely on quasi-scientific language, draw from reference materials, and frame their collecting practice as a form of historical preservation. The knowledge shared in these spaces includes evaluations based on materials, wear patterns, decals, and provenance stories. These evaluations unfold through a back-and-forth dialogue, with users adding comments and remarks, questioning claims, and offering comparative examples from their own archive. Through this process, authenticity and value are co-constructed. Forums are not only spaces for commerce and knowledge sharing, but also sites of socialization, self-representation, and status negotiation. Users build reputations over time (Baym, 1998, p. 24), with experienced collectors often serving as informal authorities whose judgments carry weight.

This study contributes to an underexplored area as scholars have examined the commodification and memory politics of Nazi artifacts, but little research has been done about how collectors themselves negotiate the items in a peer-driven and anonymous setting of a forum. Furthermore, as authentic objects from World War II are finite, this scarcity contributes to their perceived value. At the same time, the availability of replicas and so-called fantasy items (objects that never existed historically) complicates the process of authentication. Because of this, collectors increasingly rely on shared knowledge and peer judgement to determine the legitimacy of these artifacts. As a result, forums function as informal archives, marketplaces and communities where these historical objects are discussed and judged. As Ribbens (2014) says, there is a gap between the institutionalized remembrance of WWII and the portrayal in popular culture. Historians have less authority in this popular context. (pp. 87–89). The broader sociological problem addressed here is the construction and negotiation of authority, expertise, and legitimacy within the digital space of a forum.

The structure of the thesis is as follows: the next chapter synthesizes the most relevant literature for this particular research. Outlining collecting culture and situating contested objects into that framework. Then it delves into the ways that legitimacy and value are constructed in a social way. To conclude, it investigates forum dynamics and what this could mean for the social process behind authenticity.

Following that, the methodology chapter outlines the thematic analysis on secondary data as the primary source of this analysis. This analysis was done on 613 posts across 52 threads from the subforum "Axis Militaria: Taxation and verification", that have been posted between November 2018 and April 2025. In addition, I had unstructured interviews with five forum users and participant observation on a militaria fair was done to further validate and ground the findings. This made for an exploratory triangulation of the findings which illustrate how users in the dataset construct and perform expertise and shows the ways in which this creates a knowledge hierarchy. Then situated in this hierarchy of knowledge we delve into the ways in which the users negotiate authenticity, value and their practices in doing so, both practical and "idiosyncratic" as defined by Appadurai (1986/1990, p. 54). It further shows how these forum users demarcate fake objects and their consequences for their perceived "aura" (Benjamin, 1969/2007, p. 4). Lastly, it ties back into the forum dynamics, revealing the dual role some users have as sellers and the ways the users in the sample do informal policing and standards enforcement.

The thesis concludes with a discussion on what the further consequences of the findings are. The study contributes to ongoing conversations in sociology about how people engage with the material past in contemporary digital contexts. It explores that authenticity and value are not simply discovered but socially constructed.

The following chapter outlines the theoretical concepts that inform the analysis of how users of WWII collecting forums negotiate the legitimacy and value of Nazi militaria.

Literature Review

Militaria is a term describing "military objects of historical value or interest" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). These are items that range from bayonets used in battle to rolling paper for cigarettes. The terms war memorabilia and collectibles are often used on websites that specialize in selling these objects. Ever since the beginning of museums in the sixteenth century, these military pieces have been part of the private collections of collectors. Amongst other objects, they were carefully curated in so-called cabintes of curiosities (Ter Keurs, 2024, p. 21). These cabinets of curiosities were meant to impress and surprise visitors with items that were acquired to get a grasp on foreign and strange worlds (Belk, 1995, pp. 10–11). Art historian Joy Kenseth (1991) distinguishes a few traits from the objects that were key to being extraordinary, "Novelty of rarity, the foreign or exotic, the strange and bizarre" and so on (p. 25). Like the early collectors who sought the rare and exotic, modern militaria collectors seek rare objects that carry historical meaning.

Collecting culture

Walter Benjamin (1969/2007) talks about collecting from his own point of view, specifically his extensive collections of books. He categorizes them by rarity, scarcity, but in his eyes, the most important element is the memory value (p. 489). His analysis suggests that collecting extends beyond economic considerations, and that functionality and utilization are not merely grounds to hold items. He adds a layer of emotional and memory value to the objects, seeing each new item one step closer to the completion of a collection. Benjamin distinguishes the dealer and the catalogue as key components from which the collector can obtain new pieces for their collection (p. 489). In the field of WW II memorabilia collecting, *Marktplaats*, *Catawiki* (online auction) and militaria webshops form the contemporary version of the catalogue. The real-life dealer can be found on militaria fairs that occur a few times a year in the Netherlands. The largest show in the Netherlands is *Militaria Fair Houten* which happens four times a year. At this fair, dealers, whether big or small, can rent a table to sell objects ranging from authentic pieces to replicas to other collectors. Many WWII collectors are also sellers, though often in an informal way made possible by Marktplaats.

Building upon Benjamin's insights, Jean Baudrillard provides a critical lens with *The System of Objects* (1994) on the commodification of objects in contemporary consumer culture. He argues that in the shift from handmade to mass-produced goods, objects have lost their symbolic meaning and instead serve as commodities exchanged within a consumerist framework. This raised questions about whether World War II memorabilia collectors value their items primarily for personal significance or as commodities within a broader market or heritage preservation of militaria. Additionally, Baudrillard links collecting with the most personal parts of oneself and argues it to be a reflection of it. According to him, the collectors find themselves "alienated or lost within a social discourse whose rules he cannot fathom" (p. 24). The collector makes it that the object is surrounded by passion, which renders its meaning highly subjective. This is where a new alternative discourse exists where the collectors find themselves in. It is their goal to create a perfect world as an opposition for the actual non-perfect world filled with insecurity and chaos (p. 9). In this way, Baudrillard's idea of collecting as a counter-reality aligns with Benjamin's idea of the collection that serves as an archive of memory. Yet while Benjamin emphasizes the autobiographical and mnemonic power of objects, Baudrillard adds a psychological layer. Collecting offers control and the construction of a personal universe in which the objects become both a mirror and a mask. For people who collect WWII memorabilia, this world might help them make sense of the past by turning it into a clear story, even if it is just for themselves. However, as noted by Durkheim (1982), these artifacts are not just individual possessions; they embody collective memories, moral power, and shared societal values (pp. 40–43). The emotional and symbolic connections that collectors form around these objects resonate with Durkheim's concept of social currents that are intangible yet powerful social forces that guide behavior and value ascription (pp. 52–53).

In more contemporary research, Pieter ter Keurs (2024) further embroiders on these key sociological concepts by highlighting the deeply psychological and social nature of collecting. He asserts that the act of collecting objects provides individuals with structure, identity, and a sense of control amidst external chaos. Collecting may serve as a means of self-expression, a way to climb social hierarchies, or even as a method of reconciling past traumas. Ter Keurs (2023) emphasizes that the motivations behind collecting are multifaceted, with ethical considerations increasingly coming to the forefront in discussions about possession and origin (pp. 28–40). He does note that the psychological literature about collectors is mainly centered around men (p. 41). This is also very visible in Benjamin's writings about the topic as he refers to the collector as 'he'. And while the demographic of this particular forum is unknown, the salutation is often gentlemen.

Collecting contested objects

In the Netherlands, the legal framework surrounding the collection, ownership and trade of Nazi memorabilia is nuanced. Dutch law does not explicitly ban the private ownership of Nazi memorabilia provided they are kept for personal use and not displayed or used in a way that would promote hate or discrimination (Criminal Code, 2025a). The public display of Nazi symbols however, *is* illegal in the Netherlands (Criminal Code, 2025b). Besides collectors, museums and educational institutions are allowed to display Nazi memorabilia given the educational context and the preservation of historical artifacts. Nevertheless, tensions relating to these objects are visible in public discourse and jurisdiction. In August 2022, two vendors on Militaria Fair Houten were arrested because they sold original SS daggers, Stars of David and objects with swastika's (NU.nl, 2024). The public prosecutor demanded 80 hours of community service, which they were later acquitted of. After an investigation, the Public Prosecution Service called the offering of the Stars of David "'morally unacceptable' but not punishable" (NOS, 2024).

On Marktplaats, the biggest secondhand trading network of the Netherlands, users are allowed to trade Nazi militaria under the premise that they do not show the swastika or SS bolts (*Uitleg Aanstootgevend Materiaal*, n/d.). To combat this, sellers place something on top to censor it with, for example, an emoji or a sticky note (see the image 1). Objects that are excluded from this rule are coins, stamps, books and movies. The book *Mein Kampf* and publications of *Volk en Vaderland*[1] are prohibited to sell on this platform.

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[1] *Volk en Vaderland* was "the weekly newspaper from the NSB [...] and it had a propaganic nature" (*Volk En Vaderland*, n.d.)

Image 1

An emoji used in a Marktplaats advert to cover up prohibited signs

Note. Kruppstahl, n.d. (Marktplaats.nl)

Alternatively, France had "one of the earliest content cases in which Yahoo was compelled to prevent French users from accessing online auctions of Nazi memorabilia" (Gillespie, 2018, p. 27). These examples illustrate the more difficult collector's world that the collectors find themselves in as collecting Nazi Memorabilia is simply just not the same as collecting toothpicks or postal stamps. The objects themselves carry ideological weight, regardless of the collector's intent. Even when they insist "we deal in history, not politics" (Scholtz, 2024, p. 155), the public does not always separate the two so easily. The arrests at the Houten Militaria Fair highlight this tension; when the Dutch prosecutor called the sale of Stars of David "morally unacceptable" but not illegal, it showed how hard it is to draw a line between preserving this type of history and offending public values. This is not just something only private collectors deal with, *Design Museum Den Bosch* faced backlash on their 2021 exhibition 'Design from the Third Reich', causing protests from anti-fascists claiming Nazi-propaganda should not be shown in museums (Van Hoof, 2019). However, museum director Timo de Rijk begs to differ, "It will be a documentary style exhibition with no propaganda. Nazism will not be celebrated. Everything will be placed in the right context" (Meeuwsen, 2018). Institutions like Museum W in Weert argue for the educational and historical importance of preserving such items, framing them as artifacts that confront us with uncomfortable truths about the past (L1, 2024).

To put these tensions back into a sociological context, Appadurai (1986/1990) is saying that value in exchange is not always culturally consistent or fully agreed upon, and that we need a concept which he calls "regimes of value" that accounts for carrying degrees of shared understanding (pp. 15–29). The objects can circulate across different cultural contexts without requiring total agreement on what they are worth. Following his argument, we can identify multiple regimes of value that are at play; historical or collective value; ideological value (for Neo-Nazis or Far-Right Collectors); and moral rejection, where no regime of value can justify the sale.

Memory keeping

Collectors often see themselves as custodians of the past. They preserve physical links to history, so it is not forgotten, distorted, or lost. They may be motivated by a desire to understand the mechanisms, the psychology of war, or the personal stories embedded in material culture (Pearce, 1995, p. 194). In his book about critical heritage, Harrison (2013) emphasizes that preserving heritage is "an active process of assembling a series of objects, places and practices that we choose to hold up as a mirror to the present" (p. 4). The practices of collectors on the forum mirror those of the institutional heritage actors further described by Harrison. The collectors actively label, name, and try finding out the origin of the piece and who it once belonged to. They value historical integrity and preserving them in mint condition is a priority.

On the forum you can find a subforum where people can show their Axis militaria collection, making their private collection part of a bigger online archive. Besides displaying the objects in vitrines, the users of the forums even make diorama like presentations with dummies to set the scene of the warfare. This further underscores Baudrillard's (1994) idea of creating a counter reality (p. 9) which blurs the lines between personal memory and collective remembrance. In this context, Macdonald (2016) discusses how national memory practices, especially in museums, straddle the line between historical education and ideological condemnation. Germany's "Topography of Terror", a documentation center and memorial museum in the former SS headquarters in Berlin, is a prime example that acknowledges history while morally distancing from it (p. 12). The collectors may walk this same tightrope, insisting they collect for "historical interest" (Scholtz, 2024, p. 155), while being aware of the potential for ideological misuse such as glorification or denial (Macdonald, 2016, p. 11).

Cultural memory is "defined through a kind of identificatory determination in a positive ('We are this') or in a negative ('That's our opposite') sense" (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995, p. 130). This shows a tension in cultural memory; it both unites and divides. It is a source of shared meaning, but that meaning depends on drawing boundaries that can be quite rigid. This binary thinking can create internal rifts when forum users differ on whether certain memorabilia are historical or ideological. The online collectors may unite under a shared identity as historians, but debates over Nazi objects can expose ideological fractures in which someone's commitment to history can look to others like glorification or denial. These practices of memory and heritage keeping with careful preservation, display and historicization are central to how collectors define their role. Yet, this position also opens the door to deeper questions about the legitimacy of collecting such politically charged objects. This is a question that is not merely ethical or legal, they are also economic as the legitimacy and value directly impact how these items are priced, displayed and traced.

Legitimacy and value

Rarity and the condition of Nazi memorabilia play a crucial role in determining their value. While many badges that were produced during the Second World War were composed of similar metal materials, their significance lies in the symbolic meaning they carry with them. This symbolic dimension extends beyond material composition. A badge awarded to an SS officer, for instance, may be valued not only for its scarcity but also for its association with history. In this way, legitimacy is not a fixed trait, but a negotiated status dependent on the item's origin and historical context. It lies in the hands of the collector or dealer to frame it within a narrative. Over time, these artifacts have gained collectible status given their historical context which sets them apart from mass-produced collectibles (Hughes, 2022, p. 10).

Where Walter Benjamin's obsession with books forms an almost endless source for collecting, WWII militaria is different as it is bound to a specific historical epoch. No more can be produced which makes this group of collector's fish in a relatively small pond of authentic pieces. New artifacts typically enter the market after the death or retirement of another collector. Meanwhile, the production of replicas and fantasy pieces is making the market more precarious year after year. Yet this treachery makes this branch of collecting ever so appealing as collectors "value rarity in collected objects because it provides both more challenge and a greater feeling of accomplishment and higher status within the circle of collectors of similar objects" (Belk, 1995, p. 74) when they do succeed in acquiring an original.

The social life of commodities

According to Appadurai, objects "like persons, have a social life" (1986/1990, p. 3). Commodities move through different points in their life cycle including production, trade and consumption. Each of these points can be understood as a kind of "enclave" which is a space within a larger commodity flow. Within each of these spaces, people engage with commodities differently, not just practically but also culturally and symbolically. The practical (objective and technical) knowledge often gets pushed aside or overridden (p. 54). Instead of relying on accurate or technical information, people develop "subcultural" interpretations or myths about where the object came from, where it is going, or what it means. Appadurai calls these interpretations "idiosyncratic" (unique, subjective, or inconsistent) shaped by group beliefs, rumors or symbolic associations (p. 54). In certain social contexts (like auctions and bazaars), objects can become commodities even if they are usually protected from being traded (p. 15). Gillespie (2018) makes a similar argument to Appadurai's, and introduces social media spaces as different enclaves, where they "may present themselves as universal services suited to everyone, but when rules of propriety are crafted by small teams of people that share a particular worldview, they aren't always well suited to those with different experiences, cultures, or value systems" (p. 8). We can treat the WWII forum as one of these "enclaves" where the objects flow through the authentication and taxation process. Inside the forum, items are posted, debated, authenticated, and traded. Each comment adds a layer to the object's story. It is not just about facts, but about how members of the community talk about value in relation to the item. Users negotiate and establish this through visual analysis and interpretation of the photos that are being presented to them. This dynamic takes place within a broader digital infrastructure where questions of governance, control, and responsibility shape how online communities operate. As Song (2009, p. 89) notes on the terms of service:

> They do not merely involve individual members and the community at large but usually consist of a triangulation among the individual member, the community, and a third-party website provider that runs the community as a business and is legally responsible for what occurs on the website (Song, 2009, p. 89)

However, this is nuanced in our case. The forum is somewhat independent (it does make use of a CMS host structure for forums) and is not part of the major platforms like X or Reddit. The forum does not have to represent bigger values from a commercial enterprise. Also, beyond the visible moderators on subgroups on Facebook or Reddit thread starters, these bigger social media companies use computer generated moderating systems designed to filter particular words and images. Furthermore, they have teams of employees that constantly scan the internet for misconduct. Freed from the algorithmic filtering, the forum provides a semi-anonymous space where collectors can negotiate terms of trade, often setting aside cultural or ideological differences. As Harrison (2013) notes, "the values of heritage are not inherent or intrinsic . . . but instead are established in the present according to implicit or explicit criteria" (p. 145). In this way, the forum acts as a unique hobbyist archive, sustained entirely by user contributions. Compared to more regulated platforms like Yahoo and Marktplaats which enforce stricter guidelines on what is deemed acceptable, the forum has fewer restrictions on expressing controversial content, including the display of Nazi symbols and language. These differing policies reflect how each enclave constructs its own criteria for what is permissible, reinforcing Harrison's argument that heritage value is contextually produced rather than inherently fixed.

Negotiation as a social process

The negotiation of authenticity and legitimacy on online collecting forums is deeply embedded in social dynamics, where participants collectively shape standards of value and truth. In general, "the verification of nominal authenticity rests on the knowledge of collectors who have gathered the necessary expertise" (Scholtz, 2024, p. 167). Trust and expertise within the collector community dictates the perceived authenticity.

If we grasp back at Appadurai's (1986/1990) "regimes of value", ideas about value and authenticity have changed over time and depend on a context in which it is negotiated. He argues that it takes a long and complex process driven by changes in politics, technology, and culture, for society to move from valuing goods based on tradition and reputation to valuing them based on how they are produced (pp. 46–47). In this shift, the specialized knowledge once held by dealers and financiers is now being replaced by the expertise involved in large-scale, industrial production (p. 47). However, in online collecting forums, older ways of judging value still remain important. Users often rely on personal experience and storytelling about provenance rather than formal systems of expert certification. This nuance is acknowledged by Appadurai as he notes the "very complex relationship between authenticity, taste, and the politics of consumer-producer relations" (p. 47). He argues that demand is not simply just about need or desire but it reflects social practices and classifications (p. 29).

The aura of Nazi memorabilia

To own a piece from the Second World War which could be a dagger carried by a soldier or a signed photo of Adolf Hitler carries immense historical gravity because of its literal presence in the time and space of the Third Reich. Its physical connection to notorious events imbues it with a sense of authentic historical aura which is a phenomenon collectors often chase. A reproduction or similar item, no matter how visually identical, does not have this temporal and spatial tie and thus lacks the same emotional and cultural weight (Benjamin, 1969/2007, p. 3). The object has an unrepeatable singularity. For example, a dagger issued to the SS carries an aura not just because of its age or design, but because of the political and historical experiences it symbolizes. If it belonged to a high-ranking Nazi, its aura increases because it bears witness to a specific narrative in history. Its "testimony" (p. 4) is heightened through provenance, deepening its value for collectors. This very provenance makes for the auratic and monetary value. When an item is replicated and massed produced, as a lot of medals and uniforms, they lack the "aura" (p. 4) of genuine objects. Reproductions strip away the object's ability to bear witness. However, paradoxically, the more something is reproduced (e.g. swastika paraphernalia), the more the originals gain fetishistic appeal for collectors who seek out "authenticity" (p. 4) in reaction to mass replication. Furthermore, the items with direct links to Nazi leaders, take on a cult value. For some collectors, these objects are fetishized to the point of being altars of historical power (p. 6). Even if not displayed for political reasons, their acquisition can be part of a quasi-ritualistic engagement that connects oneself to a narrative of power, history, and taboo (p. 21). Nazi memorabilia cannot be fully disenchanted. Its aura persists, not because the collector glorifies its history, but because history itself is never neutral. However, it is up for discussion whether replicas can acquire an aura, one argument is that they "do not threaten the aura of the original, but seek to partake of it" (Appadurai, 1986/1990, p. 45). Reproductions of World War II militaria have been around for a number of years now. The day the Second World War ended, the production of replicas started. These were not only reproductions with a master and a copy, but the same factories also that produced military equipment or medals, just continued their production to earn money with war souvenirs. This creates a very interesting nuance in the perception of what an authentic object is as the material qualities are exactly the same.

The concept of aura helps explain why individual objects captivate collectors. It is in online forums that these personal fascinations are translated into collective and public assessments. The next section therefore shifts from the ontology of objects to the sociology of the digital spaces in which they are judged.

Online forums

Online connections and identity

The way relationships are developed on a forum looks a lot like it does offline as they take time, and they need repeated interaction to grow (Baym, 1998, p. 24). As a group, the users agree upon a shared set of values what early net-studies describe as "netiquette" (Song, 2009, p. 19). This establishes the way in which it is acceptable to communicate, for instance, not using all caps and adding quotations when they use material that is not theirs (p. 25). Besides these more practical agreements on how to communicate online, online groups also develop a shared way of thinking "which allows the group to reproduce its identity" (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995, p. 128). On the forum these informal rules can influence the ways in which collectors might negotiate the legitimacy of memorabilia by constructing group norms that define quote on quote proper collecting, which can enforce shared boundaries of acceptability. These shared norms and communication styles not only shape group identity but also set the stage for informal hierarchies to emerge, particularly through the actions of moderators.

Smedley and Coulson's (2017) research on moderators of online support communities offers insights into the roles and motivations of these key figures, which can be applied to other online spaces such as forums. Their study "found that moderators often take on their roles for altruistic reasons and experience a sense of empowerment and social value through their contributions" (p.1696). Moderators benefit personally by offering guidance and maintaining order within their communities. While close relationships can form between moderators and forum members, there is still limited research on the everyday experiences and challenges faced by these individuals. As Smedley and Coulson (2017) note, "no studies have examined the activities performed by moderators as evidenced through their online messages" (p. 1688). Another nuance to this hierarchy is the competition in this small market. "The collector must be shrewder, quicker, more knowledgeable, more discerning, more diligent, or simply luckier than other collectors in order to be successful (Belk, 1995, p. 69)". This research gap is particularly relevant in the context of World War II memorabilia forums, where moderators may shape value ascriptions through their expertise, influence, and enforcement of community norms. Understanding their role within these hierarchies could shed light on how authority and credibility affect the perceived worth of historical artifacts.

Zurné's (2024) research on World War II reenactors offers a parallel lens through which to explore how power and social capital shape these judgements. She emphasizes how people with more knowledge or social capital can decide what is authentic (pp. 31–32). The concept of authenticity is differently defined in her research as it mostly centered around performing a historically accurate portrayal of an event in WWII and *less* tied to using authentic objects (they make do with reproductions as props). When concluding her argument about authenticity, she notes, it "is thus strongly tied to questions of power, as some have more authority over assessing something as genuine or historically accurate than others" (p. 32). She argues that authenticity acts as a social filter that structures authority and credibility within a group. While her research is situated surrounding this specific type of collector, being the reenactor, this does inform us about an aspect of the collector's culture. It reinforces the idea that authenticity is not an objective quality, but a social judgment shaped by authority figures within a community. On the forum, experienced collectors, moderators and active users perform a similar role to reenactors with high social capital: they legitimize, validate or challenge claims of historical accuracy and authenticity. In most online communities, users can earn a certain status based on their level of activity, reputation, or contribution. High status essentially means a user is seen as more experienced or influential in the community (Ganley & Lampe, 2009, p. 267). Extending this, the amount of social capital also serves as "a tool for facilitating the governance of such spaces" (p. 267). In this way, forum hierarchies mirror broader social structures in which power is exercised through expertise, recognition, and the ability to define what and what is not legitimate. This power has consequences; it determines the value and legitimacy of items on the forum and could potentially determine which items are seen as worthy of preservation.

Alternatively, Yan et al. (2019) studied the causal relationship between "knowledge contribution and social capital" (p. 9) on online spaces, with a dataset composed of 1766 users. Their findings bring more insight on how this social capital unfolds in a digital setting, which is different from Zurné's insight into the reenactors who meet both online and in person. Yan et al. (2019) point out that in online user communities the "knowledge contribution is nonlinear" they note on the fact that "when users' social capital increases, they may not be as motivated to contribute more compared to the time when they only possessed a small amount of social capital" (p. 9). These findings highlight that while social capital can elevate a user's status and influence within a community, it does not always lead to sustained participation.

Together, these insights frame how authenticity, authority and value are negotiated in the forum context and guide the operationalization of these in the following methodological chapter.

Methodology

In addressing the research question, how do users of WWII collecting forums negotiate the legitimacy and value of Nazi memorabilia, this study performed a thematic analysis on 613 comments from the subforum "Taxation and Verification".

Method of analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative method for "identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). It allows a researcher to easily make sense of their dataset, both generally and in more detail. This is not just done by summarizing the posts on the forum, but by interpreting the deeper meaning and themes behind how users interact and construct the boundaries between history and value. The role of the researcher is to actively create links between themes and the concepts in the literature. It is an iterative process where the researcher goes back and forth between the data and the theoretical concepts (p. 78). Thematic analysis allows me to examine the user narratives not only as an expression of personal and historical interest but also as reflections of the broader social discourse surrounding the collecting of Nazi militaria. The responsibility of the researcher is to interpret the forum discussions and decide which conversations matter most for the research and articulate how these posts reflect or negotiate verification and value.

Before the start of the research, I tried to become as familiar as possible with the forum content by observing recurring ideas and noting early impressions (p. 210. Besides the forum which I used for the eventual analysis, I read multiple other militaria related forums and Reddit threads both nationally and internationally which helped to shape the codes. After this, the frequently used guidelines from Braun and Clarke (2006) guided me to perform the thematic analysis in a systematic and rigor manner. I used their six-phase model:

1. Familiarization
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

(Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87)

The dataset was compiled from the subforum "Taxation and Verification". The data was copy pasted into a Word document, exported as pdf's and uploaded onto the coding software *ATLAS.ti*. This software allows for easy and clear coding of large pieces of text. It also has the function to create networks between the codes that make the links visual and better interpretable for writing the findings section. Every comment and post were coded to ensure thoroughness and to build a comprehensive picture of how meaning and value are constructed across the forum, not just in a few standout threads. After coding all of the documents I created networks to visualize the links between the different codes. Based on this, the analysis in the next chapter was written.

Epistemological position

The analysis combines both semantic and latent levels of analysis. Semantic coding was used to identify explicit statements around value, legitimacy, and authenticity of memorabilia. Latent analysis explored the potential underlying hierarchical and ideological structures, such as appeals to historical objectivity. As Braun and Clarke (2006) explain, "with a semantic approach the themes are identified withing the explicit or surface meanings" and contrary on the latent level of the analysis is where "the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations-and ideologies" (p. 84) can be identified. This flexibility allows to move between descriptive and interpretive codes.

As discussed earlier, a forum operates under a set idea of values (Gillespie, 2018, p. 8). To develop the latent codes, I paid attention to stylistic and performative elements of communication. These included forms of hedging (I'm not an expert, but..."), displays of technical competence (e.g., citation of batch numbers, specialized terms), and humorous expressions (e.g., sarcasm, irony). These elements formed meaningful components on how users signal authority, uncertainty or critique within the community. The notes made earlier during the familiarization of the whole forum (including sub threads that were not in the sample) formed important insights on how these signals could be identified. It gave insight into the communication style of the forum; their use of language in terms of expertise and hierarchy, and the ways they express humor and wit. These formed the foundation of codes that were developed further during the second familiarization process during the analysis of the sample. Codes such as "humility", "sarcasm", "community policing" and "expertise referral" were developed to capture these practices. This approach was informed by the recognition that forum communication is not just content rich but also contextually layered (Baym, 1998, pp. 24–25). By accounting for digital styles of expression, the analysis aimed to remain sharp to the ways in which knowledge, value, and authenticity are co-constructed in this online setting.

Using online forums for qualitative research

Online forums provide an opportunity to explore an otherwise closed and taboo subject. "The relative anonymity of the Internet motivates contributors to greater openness" (Holtz et al., 2012, p. 56). Unlike structured interviews and surveys, which may create elicit socially desirable responses, forums allow users to express their thoughts more freely. Forums give a rich source of authentic discursive data valuable for social scientific research (p. 55). This platform serves as an "unmoderated virtual focus group, in which members of a community discuss topics without a researcher interfering and possibly influencing the expression of thoughts" (p. 56).

Forum structure

Forums are built up in a hierarchical way; in this instance the forum is divided into subforums with individual posts. These posts make for a so-called thread which "consists of an initial message where a member starts a new discussion by asking a question, describing an experience, or requesting advice, and other members contribute by posting replies" (Smedley & Coulson, 2021, p. 77). For sake of completeness, I will outline the overall structure of the forum to contextualize its broader purpose beyond the subforum that I selected for analysis. The forum is divided into several subcategories. The first, 'WO2FORUM.NL', provides general information about the forum itself. The next category is "general" which discusses actualities and media. This is followed by "Second World War" that contains an archive of events that happened along with corresponding images and other documentation. The "militaria" subforum discusses collecting militaria in terms of legalities, identification of unknown militaria and combined collections. The next two categories include "Allied Militaria" and "Axis Militaria". Lastly you have a marketplace subforum and a subforum for all that does not fit the rest of the subs. Amongst other things this entails "reproduction & re-enactment" and a "chatterbox" where people can meet online (*Forumoverzicht,* n/d).

User profiles provide additional contextual information, this includes:

– Username (likely a pseudonym)
– Age
– Occupation
– Forum groups to which the user belongs
– Interests
– Location
– Forum activity (number of posts, registration date, and the frequency of posting)
– Awards and recognition on the forum (For example, "Most Active User" or "Best Avatar of 2024")
– "Gratitude" from other users (Given with the thumbs up button when other users find the messages of the user relevant)

It is important to note that the biographies of the users vary in detail. It is not required to list all of this information; it is simply by choice. The only obligatory element of the biography is your screenname which in most cases is a pseudonym. As the socio-demographic data is self-reported, its accuracy cannot be verified. Another element of the profile is the so-called signature. This is a string of text that is displayed under every post or comment that a user makes which can be a mantra, quote or just something random. Some users utilize this space to link their Facebook or webpages where they blog about their collection and some even have an online archive or physical museum to showcase their objects. Lastly, the forum role is displayed on the profile. Besides user there are two other roles; managers and moderators. Some posts in subcategories require the approval of the moderators and managers to be made public. The moderators also have the power to close threads, delete comments and to ban users. As of the time of writing, the forum is managed by two individuals: one general manager and one technical manager. Both are also members of the group of six moderators. On the forum, the active users that are online are displayed. I am visible as user Westenstadt (a wordplay on my last name Ostendorf) with no profile picture or biography text. As for May 1st there were 473 930 messages and 31 181 threads posted, and a total of 11 117 members of the forum (Wo2 forum, n/d).

The specific subforum has general rules that are made clear through a pinned message of one of the previous moderators *Peter M*:

> "Welcome to the Axis Powers forum section. The purpose of this section is to answer questions/share knowledge regarding militaria of the Axis Powers and related. This section is for questions about militaria of the following countries during WWII (and the Interbellum):
>
> Germany
>
> Italy
>
> Japan
>
> Puppet states (such as Vichy France until 1943)
>
> Collaborating parties in the occupied countries
>
> - ....

As a note, I would also like to warn the visitor that it is quite possible to encounter provocative symbols here (rune symbols, etc.). Remember that this is inextricably linked to collecting this type of militaria. The non-functional display of these symbols is not tolerated here - just like on the rest of the forum."

Moderator *Proos* adds to that:

"Comments on the authenticity of an object MUST be substantiated. It is also a guideline to use the same substantiations only ONCE. Yes-no conversations are not allowed. No one is obliged to believe the substantiation or to consider it sufficient, show respect for that.

Objects may be submitted here for assessment. Unsolicited comments on the authenticity of an object are allowed PROVIDED that they are substantiated and made only once. Repeating the contributions of others is also undesirable.

If someone wants to show an object or collection without being addressed about its authenticity, the section "collectors & collections" may be more suitable.

A detailed discussion of specific objects can take place in this section.

Report complaints directly to a moderator of the collection section" (Peter M & Proos, 2004).

Now that you are familiar with the digital landscape in which this research is situated, the next paragraph explains how the threads were sampled and coded.

The data selection

The secondary data consists of 52 discussion threads that resulted in 613 replies that could be analyzed. The source is from the public forum wo2forum.nl, a Dutch / Flemish platform where users exchange information about collecting World-War II related objects. Specifically, the threads were downloaded from the subforum that only includes discussion about Axis militaria, "Verification and taxation". The Axis powers include Germany, Italy, Japan and Marionet states, however the forum discussion mostly surrounds German artifacts. In the dataset coincidentally only Nazi German objects are discussed. The data reflects interactive discussions initiated between November 2018 and April 2025. The dataset was manually compiled by me, and each thread was archived including metadata such as title, number of replies and number of views.

Besides the data from the publicly available threads, I had personal contact through private messages with five users of the forum that were also participants in the threads in the dataset. We came in contact through a message that I posted on the subforum "*Babbelbox*" (chatterbox) which can be used to talk about other things than just World War II militaria. I posted the following message (in Dutch) on April 17th, 2025, with the topic "Master thesis on collecting militaria":

> "Hi everyone,
>
> For my master thesis I am doing research on collecting World War II militaria. Over the past few weeks, I have enjoyed reading a large part of this forum. I am impressed by your dedication and the enormous knowledge of your collections. What struck me in particular is the willingness to help each other, which is really nice to see!
> I am very curious about your personal stories: what made you decide to start collecting? And what makes you still do it with so much enthusiasm?
> If you would like to share your story with me, please send me a private message or respond below.
>
> Best,
> Florien"

Following up on this message I posted the following on May 20th after some users in the private messages expressed some concerns about the privacy:

> "I have already had the opportunity to speak with some people which has been super valuable. If you have doubts whether to share your story through this forum, you can reach me through my email address ▉▉▉▉▉▉
> All correspondence that will be used is strictly anonymous."

Besides this open invitation I also messaged several users on the forum with the same inquiry. Another collector I interviewed was not active on this particular forum; he was referred to me by one of the users I interviewed. The messages that followed between me and the German militaria collectors were responses that added additional contexts and insights, rather than a formal data collection. Our personal correspondence can be found in Appendix IV. Consent was given by the users to use this information in an anonymized way. Besides this I also did participant observation at *Militaria Fair Houten*. I had the opportunity to talk to multiple vendors and visitors about the forum and the authentication process. Together, these methods form an exploratory methodological triangulation which validates the internal and external validation of the findings (Grønmo, 2020, p. 287).

Sampling strategy

The sampling method was criterion-based sampling (Grønmo, 2020, p. 156), with a deliberate focus on the subforum "Axis militaria - taxation and verification" as this is where users negotiate value and authenticity. The threads were selected on a chronological hierarchy which the forum lists them as. I only selected posts with a minimum of 8 replies to ensure richer data that included interaction between multiple users (Holtz et al., 2012, p. 57).

Ethics

In *Research Ethics and the Internet*, Kitchin (2007) explains that informed consent is not relevant in this instance as the usage of forum posts do not "violate the privacy of members, given that they had positioned their contributions within a public space and had relinquished their privacy by doing so" (p. 44). Since the subforum that has been selected for analysis is open to the public, "analyzing such boards without consent may be less of an ethical concern" (Holtz et al., 2012, p. 56). Mckee and Porter (2009) bring some nuance to this statement as they emphasize that "a researcher reading and quoting material without participants' knowledge may, as we describe in more detail below, certainly cause harm to individual and to the communities in which they interact" (p. 84). They demarcate the object of study between "publication" and "people" (Figure 4-1, p. 82) meaning a "text-based" or "person based" view of research. As this research aims to do the first, no informed consent was asked of the users that were in the sample. To protect the user this publication contains "as little potentially identifying information about the individual users as absolutely necessary" (Holtz et al., 2012, p. 57). Besides the public posts, this research draws results from private communication between me and collectors through private messages. In this instance, the role of the researcher was made known, and consent to use their experiences was granted by the users. To protect the identity of the collectors that I both had personal contact and appear in the dataset as users of the forum, different pseudonyms were used. As it is not observable for the reader that quotes are from the same person, I paid close attention to not over-represent one user in the findings. Moderators that appear in the dataset are also anonymized. The reason behind this, though this is a public subforum, this thesis engages in analysis of their role in the discourse on the forum. These contributions can be viewed as personal, which makes it necessary to protect their identity as they did not give consent.

As for the participant observation, I did not ask for consent from the Militaria Fair Houten. The observations were jotted down, and no audio or visual documentation was made as this was prohibited by the fair's rules and regulations. In the one-on-one conversations I had with vendors and visitors, I always revealed my role as a researcher and my research objective at the beginning of the conversation.

Operationalization / Codebook

Based on the ideas outlined in the literature, a codebook was developed with key concepts. This codebook was iteratively refined during the research process to reflect developed patterns. After the analysis, the following key concepts were identified: historical significance, legitimization of value, type of object (e.g., fantasy items, reproduction, forgeries), moral ambiguity, aesthetic appreciation, social interaction, hierarchy and identity. These codes resulted in the following themes: Constructing and performing expertise, Practices of authenticity verification, Negotiating value in the marketplace, and lastly, Community governance and boundary maintenance. The full codebook, including sub-themes and descriptions, can be found in Appendix I.

The next section presents the findings of the thematic analysis that was conducted on the subforum of "Verification and taxation". Besides quotes from the forum, the findings are further illustrated by quotes from the personal correspondence I had with users of the forum. These messages can be viewed in Appendix III. At times, the quotes are slightly altered (especially in punctuation) to improve the reading experience.

Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the thematic analysis of how users of World War II collecting forums negotiate the legitimacy and value of Nazi memorabilia.

Constructing and Performing Expertise

The theme of expertise is central to the way users participate in, and shape discussions around value and authenticity. Users appear to build credibility through consistent participation, perceived knowledge, and recognition by others in the community. This aligns with Ganley and Lampe's (2009, p. 267) observation that high-status users are often those who demonstrate consistent activity and are perceived as knowledgeable or influential by their peers.

Hierarchies of knowledge

While moderators hold formal authority within the forum, several patterns suggest that expertise and status are also attributed informally. Certain users are frequently referenced or deferred to, when specific subtypes of objects are discussed like helmets or daggers. This creates authoritative voices that influence how legitimacy is negotiated. One user, widely referred to for questions regarding helmets, is routinely tagged or name-dropped when such items come up. Appreciation for informative contributions is expressed through "thanks", and those who receive the most are publicly listed on the homepage. This mechanism reinforces the visibility of knowledgeable users. As Scholtz (2024) observes, "the verification of nominal authenticity rests on the knowledge of collectors who have gathered the necessary expertise" (p. 167). In this forum, such expertise is both recognized and reproduced through social interaction. Besides these socially constructed hierarchies, there is also a quantifiable aspect of visibility and engagement made apparent through a user's post count and registration date, which become markers of trust and expertise. This form of hierarchy may influence how authentication claims are received. When a well-regarded user makes a statement about an object, that opinion tends to go uncontested or is accepted more readily than that of a newer or less active member. This mirrors Belk's (1995, p. 74) claim that collectors compete not only for objects but also for prestige within collecting communities. As one collector puts it:

> The degree of credibility is very important, and it grows with the many correct answers. Members with such a track record, their judgment weighs the heaviest. (Personal correspondence, User III)

Rhetorically, hedging is a common practice when users put their two cents in on the discussion. Many comments begin or end with sentences like "I'm no expert but..." or "correct me if I'm wrong." These add-ons serve a social function in which they acknowledge the communities hierarchy and preempt possible correction. As Appadurai (1986/1990) argues, value is not intrinsic to objects as it is made through social processes. In this case, the credibility of the speaker can outweigh the material certainty of the object. The forum thus becomes a space where the sociology of value is enacted in real time; through comment threads, recognition systems, and the subtle labor of peer judgment. Something that further emphasizes this hierarchy is the fact that seasoned members often take on an informal mentorship role, guiding newer users through the common pitfalls, appropriate posting etiquette, and the intricacies of the authentication process.

One member, in reference to a typical beginner mistake, reassured the poster:

> If he still reads this, he has nothing to be ashamed of. I think we've all made an impulse purchase or fallen for the sweet talk of a salesperson. Which after that we will do our research before making a purchase! (User O)

This mentorship serves a dual function; it supports new users of the forum while simultaneously reproducing the forum's internal hierarchy. Mistakes made by newcomers, such as posting on the wrong subforum, are typically met with a correction rather than ridicule. This is usually followed up with a welcome to the forum and a pointer to the forums' rules and regulations. Taken together, these observations indicate that expertise on the forum is not simply declared but is built through interaction, validation, and adherence to community norms. This process plays a foundational role in shaping the ways users negotiate authenticity and value within this digital community.

Community Governance and Boundary Work

In contrast to much of the literature, where moderators are positioned as central gatekeepers, the findings on this subforum suggest that moderators on this forum play a more limited role in shaping content. While they manage the technical and organizational structure (such as relocating posts to the correct subforum), they do not always participate in the verification and valuation discussions. The users actively police internal standards and delineate clear boundaries around legitimacy and the way people act on the forums. Certain types of behavior are not appreciated, which is in line with Song's (2009) idea of "netiquette" (p. 19).

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Unlike bigger social media platforms, where the moderating infrastructure is like the Erasmus bridge, this particular forum is the gondola next to it. Wo2forum.nl is solely dependent on the human eye to make these judgements and is done manually. This allows for more content to slip through the moderation cracks, especially when enforcement focuses mainly on user experience rather than content regulation. As Song (2009) notes, the crafting of the terms of service relies on a triangulation "among the individual member, the community, and a third-party website provider" (p. 89). While this subforum has specific rules of regulations to ensure that the sensitivity of these objects is dealt with correctly, the users do not necessarily adhere to this. Instead, the forum largely self-regulates through informal moderation, discursive performance, and peer accountability. This aligns with Gillespie's (2018) concept of "invisible governance systems" (p. 15), where community members, rather than appointed authorities, maintain order through subtle social cues and hierarchies of expertise.

Micro-hierarchies of authority are evident in the language users employ. Phrases such as "I'm no expert, but…" are common, signaling both humility and competence. Corrections are generally offered without judgment, preserving the inclusive tone of the forum:

> Indeed, discussions sometimes start later. It is easier for some to join in on something than to start something. No one will "condemn" you, I think. (User J)

Such interactions help shape what Yan et al. (2019) call a "shared vision" (p. 3) within online user communities. They argue that participation in these interactions promotes learning and increases the users' cognitive capital, which in turn encourages further knowledge-sharing (p. 3). As seen in the forum, knowledge flows both from experienced collectors to newcomers:

> We're lucky to have a few members here who really know a lot about helmets and batch numbers, so stay tuned. I only have basic knowledge myself and would never buy a helmet without serious help from those collectors. (User C)

> Lemmy, don't be fooled just because something looks old. The malicious people who make reproductions and sell them as originals have become very good at aging materials. They've done it so much that there are even books written on how to recognize it (User A)

These examples illustrate how community governance is enacted less through formal authority and more through peer mentorship, shared experience, and social recognition.

Moderators' dual role

While moderators may not show strong influence over content discussions, the dataset revealed a dual role as both governance figures and marketplace participants. This complicates perceptions of neutrality and fairness within the community. Smedley and Coulson (2017) argue that moderators in online communities frequently "take on their roles for altruistic reasons and experience a sense of empowerment and social value through their contributions" (p. 1696). However, in this case when moderators also participate in trades or appraisals, their perceived authority may influence how others assess trustworthiness and value. Their elevated status can affect how other users perceive risk and trust in transactions. One forum post illustrates this dynamic:

> The only risk is that I have to get it shipped because it's coming from Belgium, but the user is a moderator on the forum, so that should be fine (User U)

A similar sentiment appeared in another user's comment: "Those guys are okay, especially if it's a moderator" (User Q). These examples reflect how the symbolic authority of moderators can translate into perceived reliability in marketplace interactions

One of the moderators is not particularly high on the 'thanks' list. In our personal correspondence, User III shared with me that he thinks the moderators are chosen not only because of their knowledge on collecting, but also because of their technical knowledge of knowing how to run a forum.

Practices of Authenticity Verification

The findings show that authenticity verification is a collective, heuristic practice deeply rooted in community norms and skeptical inquiry. It reveals how historical legitimacy is actively co-constructed. This is in line with Appadurai (1986/1990, p. 46) as he notes, "Authenticity here is not the province of experts and esoteric criteria, but of popular and public kinds of verification and confirmation". These practices range from technical checks to interpretive evaluations and are often shaped by a mix of learned experience, reference materials, and communal feedback. This structure of interaction is in line with Harrison's (2013) understanding heritage as an active, future-oriented process (p. 4). Through their comments, the users do not only assess value in the present but they also contribute to the ongoing construction of a heritage framework that can be accessed or referred to in future valuations, either for debunking or reaffirming. It is rooted in the idea that authenticity, and by extension legitimacy, is a continuing negotiation rather than a settled fact.

Quasi-forensic methods

A recurring pattern in the dataset was the reliance on quasi-forensic techniques to verify objects. Users often refer to specific manufacturing codes, materials, construction details, or wear patterns to substantiate their claims. These discussions are frequently accompanied by close-up photographs and requests for better lighting or different angles. Some users also suggest using UV light to detect inconsistencies or modern materials, which they frame as indicative of post-war fabrication. Despite the technical nature of these checks, the physical documentation such as medals with corresponding certificates did not appear in my dataset. During my militaria fair visit, such documents were more visible, prompting one user to comment:

> Unfortunately, it is an exception to find additional information with a war medal. That is because of the traders, who want to make money quickly and do not take historical value into account. The items of many war veterans have ended up with traders via relatives. Those traders do not keep everything together but take everything apart. The certificates on the pile of certificates, the crosses with the crosses. The *Wehrpas* on the pile of *Wehrpassen*, so much damage has been done in that way (Personal correspondence, User III)

Rather than official documentation, most claims rely on visual comparison and anecdotal memory, claims are often framed by phrases like "looks right to me" (User A). Which as Appadurai (1986/1990) suggests, results in "idiosyncratic" (p. 54) systems of belief about an object's origin and value. While the users say that they utilize institutional knowledge systems such as books, the source is rarely made public. There were only three instances where a user added a bibliography.

> The helmet looks like it has folded edges on the bottom and punched air holes. That would make it an *M40* helmet. The decal (eagle) is from the *Wehrmacht*, the regular German army in WW2. I can't find the lot number DN23 in my helmet database, so I can't tell you much more. The price for a helmet like this with a liner is around €750 - €1000. Without a liner I wouldn't dare to say. Hopefully this info is of some use to you. (User T)

While these methods echo formal authentication practices, they are often limited by the quality of available images and the absence of physical access. Nonetheless, they appear to offer a collectively accepted form of assessment that substitutes for institutional expertise.

Skepticism towards provenance

Forum participants frequently express skepticism toward anecdotal provenance claims. Stories like "My grandfather got it from a 'good' German who passed on information to him because he was part of the resistance" (User W) or this object was "found in the wall of an old farm" (User X) are often met with polite doubt in the form of requests for additional evidence. When a user claimed that he found a SS dagger (one of the most sought after and expensive items), user C sarcastically commented:

> If I am being honest: the chance that a SS dagger appears in a house where a NSB'er[2] had lived is very, very small. It is possible, if one of the residents was in service of the Waffen-SS and went to the East, and then during a break he would hide his dagger in the house, perhaps after a reconstruction the dagger would see the light again.

---

[2] "NSB'er" refers to a member "of the National Socialist Movement. This was an extreme right-wing Dutch political party from 1931 to 1945. The party is best known for its collaboration with the German occupiers during World War II" (Vonkeman, 2025).

When provenance cannot be substantiated with documents or photographs, the authenticity of the object itself tends to come under more scrutiny. The distrust here is not pointed at the users who are sharing the provenance story, but it is mostly blamed on the dealer when a provenance story sounds unlikely or simply, too good to be true. This skepticism in dealers is quite often the case. On the same forum there is a page dedicated to outing dishonest sellers and sharing experiences about scams and forgeries. On the contrary, there is also a page devoted to sharing positive experiences. Keeping in mind that some collectors have a dual role as sellers, conflicts of interest may arise. An example of this is a thread where a user asked for the taxation of a beret, he claimed to have found with his metal detector in a field. Commentors under this post speculated that he buried a replica in the dirt to make it look like an authentic piece. These examples show the possible dangers of the reproductions of false narratives while moving between hands of owners. Appadurai (1986/1990) notes that factual knowledge about objects gets replaced by group-specific beliefs or stories about what they are, where they came from, or what they mean. When expert knowledge is uneven, people can invent their own ideas about an item's origin or meaning. This may possibly lead to "fetishism" projecting value beyond the object's material qualities (p. 54). An example of this is the negotiating surrounding an autograph:

> I know an old NSBer, who passed away a while ago. He gave me the book Mein Kampf (in German). Together with 2 postcards, one of which was signed. He, as a loyal follower, told me with pride that he had once met Adolf and had him sign this card. (User F)

A few messages later the autograph was debunked through a reference book. The card itself however was analyzed to be an authentic piece:

> This was a portrait card with a generous spoken value of €50, which unfortunately has now lost half of its value due to the signature. Still a beautiful card and a special gift, absolutely! (User C)

The doubt that is expressed in the provenance stories in the posts underscores a shift that wanders away from relying on origin myths toward visual and material evaluation. Anecdotal claims never truly suffice on their own, the object must speak through its comparison to known references. The community has a collective vigilance and help each other walk through the "minefield of collecting German" as User II puts it in our conversation.

Despite technical efforts, many authentication decisions appear to rely on unspoken rules or gut feelings developed through community interaction. Phrases like "it just doesn't feel right" or "the font seems off" appear across multiple threads. These statements are often followed by a request for additional opinions, suggesting that certainty is rarely claimed by a single user. This aligns with Stoler's (2009) point that "it was not epistemic clarity but epistemic uncertainty that generated the densest debates" (p. 43). In this context, ambiguity does not hinder participation, rather it invites collaboration. Within these intuitive judgements, a sub-pattern emerged which involves the reliance on longstanding, often unchallenged knowledge claims. Users sometimes reference "golden-rules" or past evaluations as benchmarks for current assessments. These norms reproduce a "shared vision" (Yan et al., 2019, p. 3) of what authenticity looks like and how it should be verified. For example, the rule of thumb that a specific type of helmet can never contain more than two decals:

> The consensus used to be that you could no longer find a decal on *M-42* or *KM*, on *LW* and *WH*. *SS* it was in fact possible. And indeed, *Polizei*, *NSKK*, *RAD* and *Feldhernhall*e happily continued with stickering. But I bought my last helmet at least 25 years ago and after that I did not really follow the developments anymore. So, what I know is dusty or outdated. Just like myself. (User C)

These default assumptions appear to persist over time and shape how newer items are being evaluated, despite users rejecting these rules of thumb. The knowledge continues to circulate even it may no longer be accurate or universally accepted. Some users even use their own objects as point of reference for to assess another objects' authenticity. The risk of these false positives or negatives in authentication is high because past claims linger in the forum archive, potentially reducing the resale value or credibility of an object.

> The consequence of showing you stuff online is that it means your stuff is instantly captured in a database. It is not pleasant if your stuff is wrongly accused of being fake [User C]

Such reliance on precedent is not necessarily uncritical. Disagreements sometimes emerge, with users challenging older claims or proposing updated interpretations. However, these challenges tend to gain traction only when endorsed by users with perceived authority. This suggests that while the community can revise its heuristics, the process is slow and dependent on existing hierarchies. A telling example of this is seen in comments from User I who wrote: "I do not believe that story for one second, the bayonet and sheath are scrambled together. The numbers do not correspond..." Three hours later the same user posted another commented: "I have to reiterate myself; the numbers are infact corresponding... *mea culpa*."

In this way, operating under a status quo can serve both as a stabilizing force and a potential limitation. It reinforces a shared baseline of knowledge, making discussions more coherent, but may also hinder the acceptance of new or contradictory information. This shared knowledge base is central to group identity. As Assmann and Czaplicka (1995) argue, this "A group bases its consciousness of unity and specificity upon this knowledge and derives formative and normative impulses from it, which allows the group to reproduce its identity" (p. 128). This highlights how collective judgment is not only a process of active negotiation but also one of inherited assumptions.

Still, to say that the forum users only do educated guesses is diminishing their expertise and experience. The practices on wo2forum.nl reveal a form of expertise that extends beyond factual knowledge or historical accuracy. It involves a cultivated way of seeing. Cristina Grasseni's concept of skilled vision is instructive in this regard. Drawing from her ethnographic work among cattle breeders, Grasseni (2007) argues that "skilled vision, tacit knowledge and social mimicry" are central to the formation of professional identities (p. 48). In a similar vein, the collectors on the forum develop a "trained eye" through repeated exposure, peer validation, and communal discourse, allowing them to discern authenticity not just in technical terms but through socially embedded cues. Just as Grasseni describes how cattle breeders rely on a mediated ecology of visual tools to train their perception such as plastic model cows, manuals, and breed standards (pp. 48–56), collectors use a similar apparatus with photographs, catalogues, image comparisons, and shared heuristics. These visual and narrative devices become standards through which value and authenticity are negotiated. In doing so, forum participants do not merely verify objects; they collectively educate each other's attention, gradually aligning individual judgments with the visual and material norms of the community. This "skilled vision" (p. 48) also contributes to the construction of online identities. Recognition by more experienced members, the ability to identify minute details, or posting a successful verification all contribute to one's status within the forum. Like Grasseni's breeders, forum members internalize aesthetic and technical standards that may appear intuitive or self-evident but are in fact socially acquired. The trained eye thus becomes a marker of legitimacy, both for the object under discussion and for the collector presenting it.

Crucially, this process of perception training can move beyond the individual. As Yan et al. (2019) suggest, such community-based interactions and learning "are likely to enhance shared vision among users and impact their subsequent attitude towards knowledge sharing" (p. 3). In this sense, individual skilled vision gradually becomes shared vision, anchored in collective norms and sustained by participatory knowledge practices.

However, given that they are evaluating through a screen takes away a part of the tactile experience which is essential to skilled vision. This became evident at the Militaria Fair, where I discussed with a vendor whether a tobacco pipe belonged to the WWI or WWII era. One rule of thumb is that if the pipe is constructed from Bakelite. This material introduced in the Interbellum is a great hint to see whether it belonged to the WWII side of his display table. To identify the Bakelite the vendor had me rub the pipe and smell it and urged me to lick it (which I kindly declined). Then he had me tap the pipe against a piece of Bakelite. It had to make a *clack* sound, not a *click* sound which is unique to the material.

This experience showed me the importance of the sensory experience of the authentication process which is obviously missing from the forum experience as you cannot (yet) smell or lick an image on your screen. It underscored a significant contrast between in-person and online verification in which the sensory field is limited and thus limits the capacity of the evaluation. This echoes Grasseni's (2007, pp. 48–56) broader argument that skilled vision always emerges within a mediated ecology which in this case, is one where the screen restricts the range of sensory tools available to users. Notably, these limitations are rarely acknowledged in the forum posts. Material clues such as texture or tactile feedback are largely absent from authentication advice. Only once in the dataset, a user (who also owns a webshop dealing in militaria) suggested to bring his dagger to a fair as he wanted to see it in person before he could make a confident taxation claim.

Demarcating the fake, the forgery and the Frankenstein

In the forum discussions, once an object is deemed inauthentic, a secondary process unfolds that categorizes the object into distinct categories. Each has varying implications for the value and willingness to take it into their collection. In the realm of fakes, the users distinguish between reproductions, forgeries and fantasy pieces. This suggests that the term "fake" is not just a singular or stable label, but exist on a spectrum. These categories are not just technical, but they serve as value assignments and moral judgements that guide the decisions of collectors.

Reproductions and forgeries

Reproductions are widely recognized as copies of original wartime items, created for reenactment, display or for educational purposes. They are not necessarily made to deceive, but their presence in the market complicates authentication efforts. The desire to own a replica differs from collector to collector and from object to object. Some only choose to collect authentic pieces and some make do with the reproduction. An element of this that was not identified in the forum posts that were analyzed is the "premium reproduction". This is a term used by auction houses to label reproductions on the higher end, let's say the Gucci's of the reproduction world. These reproductions are made specifically for the collector and are valued for their craftsmanship and attention to detail.

Not all reproductions are placeholders waiting for an original. The reproductions do not always serve as a stand-in for when the authentic object comes along and can replace its spot on the socket, some objects are just simply out of reach for the average collector. As multiple users note in the personal correspondence; some original items are simply unattainable due to scarcity, price or legal restrictions. In this context, reproductions can still hold display value. This finding challenges the simplistic distinctions between "authentic" and "inauthentic" and further showcases the socially stratified spectrum of the fakes.

Expanding on this, forum members often distinguish between types of inauthentic items by scrutinizing the seller's intent. The key difference between a reproduction and a forgery lies in transparency. While some collectors are willing to purchase a reproduction and do not see this as an issue, problems arise when there is a pretense that they are purchasing an authentic object. It is in these cases that the item is labelled a forgery by the forum community. Though even when an object is identified as a forgery or reproduction, it is still appraised by users. These objects are not considered worthless, but it is frowned upon when people are not honest about what they are selling. In this way, the distinction is not only material, but also moral.

Fantasy items and the boundaries of historical plausibility

A separate category discussed on the forum is that of fantasy items. These are objects that never existed in the historical record and thus have no material tie to an original. They are created using imagined designs and invented insignia. The distinguishing of a fantasy rests on what cannot be found in the reference books. During the WWII, the regulations regarding the usage of the swastika were installed by Minister of Propaganda, Josef Goebbels to protect "the 'dignity' of the Nazi swastika and preventing its unauthorized commercial use" (Quinn, 1994, p. 3). Given its controlled production, we have a pretty clear idea about what is, and what is not produced during that time. A user shared their experience on the forum with being offered a fantasy piece:

> Once I got offered a 'nazi propaganda' ashtray with an image of Hitler in it. I can assure you: no one in the period between 33 and 45 would dare to stub their cigarettes out on the face of Hitler (User C)

Fantasy items have the possibility to exist in a realm where the maker wishes to continue the ideology of Nazism and makes objects in support of this. One example of this on the forum is an altered Dutch Parachutist Barett emblem that contained a swastika. Forum users engaged in a collaborative interpretation of the piece, ultimately concluding that it was likely produced by a Dutch individual who had fought in the Waffen-SS. After the liberation of the Netherlands these people had the choice to be incarcerated or to serve the KNIL (the Royal Dutch Indonesian army) in the ongoing battle in Indonesia. This pin was crafted to still show support to (the by then deceased) Adolf Hitler. The claim of this user was backed up with from the book *Er waren er die niet gingen* [There were those who did not go] written by Henny Zwart (1995), which documents the experiences of Dutch soldiers in the Indonesian war.

Image 2 - *The altered piece*

Image 3 - *The original*

When a beginner collector asked for opinions on dagger he plans on buying he was met with this answer from User D:

> I see that the dagger is updated with a Luftwaffe eagle in the middle, I have never seen it on such a dagger as this. The piece is glorified to make it more attractive and to sell faster. With that image on it is a red flag to me...

Other fantasy items are less historically, or provenance charged. An example of this is one user that asked for the verification of a beer pull that was decorated with gaudy images of Hitler and swastika. As the latter sentence might already hint, this piece was quickly deemed to be fake by the users.

> Unfortunately, this kind of "Nazi kitsch" is often offered for sale. It therefore has no historical value. (User R)

The poster responded:

> I didn't pay too much for it and it looks nice in the display case now. It is a nice object to talk about. (User Y)

Image 4

Note. JJoostWW2, n.d. Wo2forum

Image 5

Note. JJoostWW2, n.d. Wo2forum

Although fantasy items hold a very little percentage in the dataset as opposed to authentic or replicas, these discussions show interesting discourse on how the user's piece together historical relevance and interpretation to make sense of an object that falls out of the known categories.

Post-war alterations: De-Nazified and Frankenstein objects

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Beyond the fake versus real dichotomy lies another category: original items that were altered *after* the war. These include de-Nazified objects which are artifacts that are stripped of their Nazi symbols due to legal or moral pressures in the aftermath of the war. Though many Nazi artifacts were destroyed, given the extreme scarcity and poverty some objects were re-used. Users speak with distaste when an object is undone from its signage that refers to the German powers as it plummets the value of the piece.

> Judging from these pictures it looks original. Too bad they replaced a swastika with a LW eagle. It never left the factory like that. It could have been added at some point, but that is hard to tell (User H)

The poster still accepts it as part of his collection:

> I still find it a beautiful dagger even though it was tampered with (User G)

Under this category falls the so-called Frankenstein pieces where different parts from different times and origins make up a new item. These items are mostly for display usage and do not have a use function (e.g., the gun cannot fire). What adds another dimension to the authenticity discourse is when inauthentic parts are used to supplement in-complete items. For example, helmets straps are added if they are missing. Multiple times this has been referred to as crafting. This is often framed as a violation of authenticity but also seen as a more practical solution to make the visual display look more complete. Often times the objects are evaluated part by part, and each part receives its own verification.

Aura and historical authenticity

The classifications discussed above (reproduction, forgery, fantasy and Frankenstein) do more than sort objects; they reflect the deeper idea on what makes something feel historically authentic. They form an interesting discussion point in regard to aura as defined by Benjamin (1969/2007). Because the findings show that the aura of reproductions does encapsulate the power of the original to some extent. Something interesting happens when the value of replicas is negotiated. The replicas find their aura in the same provenance as the original pieces. Where it is not their "testimony" (p. 4) that loads the item, it is its mere mnemonic power. This becomes clearer when we view the discourse surrounding the de-nazified objects. The removal of a swastika on a helmet does not clear its testimony, the helmet was still worn by the soldier and used in the battle. But it does impact the visual representation of that time. A prerequisite of value is how intact the object is so following that line of thought, *yes*, de-Nazification does impact the object. But the essential part of wanting to possess that object is that symbol. And users reflect this and mark the de-Nazification of the object as "unfortunate" and "a shame".

Beyond physical alteration, another dimension affecting an an object's aura is the collector's belief in its authenticity, even when that belief is mistaken. This tension is illustrated in a post where a woman sought a valuation for an SS *Totenkopfring*, describing it as the centerpiece of her late father's collection. Forum members quickly questioned its authenticity, and within a few replies, the ring was identified as a reproduction. Nonetheless, for her father, he never knew it was a reproduction. He died believing it was genuine, its meaning and aura shaped by a false personal narrative rather than material fact. A similar dynamic was shared with me in personal correspondence. One user described a major scandal in the collecting world:

> Quite a few collectors had an expensive Knight's Cross from the S&L company, years later these turned out to have been made in 1950 or later. Sometimes with original parts, sometimes with new parts. But it was not produced before May 1945, so it cannot be called an original. Minefield. [Personal correspondence, User II]

These examples highlight how aura is not inherent to an object, but socially and emotionally constructed. Whether based on fact, assumption, or misinformation, the value attributed to militaria remains deeply intertwined with narrative, memory, and belief.

Negotiating value

While the question of authenticity takes up most of the space in the forum discussion, the question about value is never far behind. What becomes clear from the dataset is that value is not determined through a formal pricing system or fixed criteria, but through relative comparisons with objects that have already been sold. One essential point that emerged from the personal communication with the collectors and the conversation on the militaria fair is that value is not purely understood in monetary terms. User III describes the moment that he bought his first iron cross:

> Wow... a very rich feeling. I also immediately realized: I want more of these. I drove home euphoric, very satisfied. Now I have 51 iron crosses. The value of which varies between 150 and 950. I still remember exactly which one that first cross was. (Personal communication)

Several collectors brought up the noticeable shift in how German militaria is priced and sold. One user reflects:

> In the years that I started, the simplest version was listed for 2,500 to 4,000. Back then we already thought that was ludicrous. The same medal would now cost 20,000. That has nothing to do with normal price trends. The number of medals is actually the same. The demand has apparently increased.

> The prices now are determined by the big dealers and the auction houses. These are no longer real prices. Since the euro, it has become a madhouse. Foreign collectors with enormous capital pay thousands of euros or dollars for a medal without thinking and the dealers call it a real price, because it was once sold for that price. But it is simply what the fool paid for it (Personal communication, User III)

This quote highlights a tension in the collecting world; collecting as a passion to collecting as speculation. As Appadurai (1986/1990) notes, in speculative markets, value is driven less by historical or cultural context and more by what he calls "mythologies produced by traders and speculators who are largely indifferent to both the production origins and the consumption destination of commodities" (p. 48). This insight is echoed in a private message from User II, who reflect on the transformation of Nazi militaria into investment assets:

That is the core of the problem, the passion for collecting has slowly changed into the value of the stuff. On many forums the question about the value is therefore no longer answered. The value corrupts the hobby.

Here, value becomes increasingly abstract and driven by market considerations rather than historical significance. This shift introduces a new mode of valuation that contrasts with the forum's more community-based ethic, where collecting is rooted in shared expertise, mentorship, and personal interest. As financial speculation enters the domain of militaria collecting, it complicates the meaning of ownership and challenges the values traditionally upheld by the forum's users.

Conclusion

Main findings

This thesis set out to explore how collectors of Nazi militaria negotiate the legitimacy, authenticity, and value within the digital setting of an online forum. Through a thematic analysis of 613 comments across 52 threads, supported by interviews with collectors and field observation, these insights show that authenticity and value are not only discovered as intrinsic qualities but are socially produced through continuous negotiation within a specific knowledge enclave.

Forum users evaluate items using what can be described as quasi-forensic techniques, using specialist literature, and drawing on visual cues and material features. Yet, these assessments are shaped just as much by social cues: hedging, status recognition, and peer recognition. Expertise is shown by sustained participation and a reputation that is built over time. The judgements made by key validators carry more weight which reinforces this internal knowledge hierarchy. Through a mix of visual analysis, storytelling, and community expertise, collectors engage in heuristic practices to distinguish originals from replicas or fantasy pieces. These practices reveal how online forums act as informal systems for producing knowledge and maintaining collecting standards in a market where deception and reproduction are common

The research process, guided by a qualitative approach of a thematic analysis enabled the development of patterns in communication, authority and valuation, while participant observation and user correspondence grounded this in lived experience. This exploratory triangulation strengthened the validity of the findings and provided a more nuanced view.

This thesis contributes to the broader sociological understanding of digital communities, material culture, and the construction of historical value. It shows how online spaces can serve as informal archives and a theatre where historical meaning is actively assembled, contested, and redefined. It highlights the blurred boundaries between historical preservation and market speculation and challenges the traditional notions of heritage, expertise and authenticity. This study has revealed that legitimacy in collecting is far more complex than a simple dichotomy between original and fake.

The process in which authentication and legitimacy are negotiated mirrors Appadurai's (1986/1990) description of "enclaves" (p. 54) in which commodities circulate through specific regimes of value. Yet unlike the face-to-face enclaves that Appadurai observed, this digital enclave is permanently accessible, searchable, and archived. Besides the identification of authentic items, the discourse around inauthentic objects are both deemed as valuable. Epistemic uncertainty is not an embarrassment but the very engine of the debate. The threads remain open precisely because the answer is unclear. As Stoler (2009) argues, ambiguity is not a flaw but a productive force for "the densest debates" (p. 43). What counts as evidence therefore expands beyond material; it tests and involves hunches such as 'the font seems off' and heuristics like 'this model never carries two decals'. Such heuristics are sticky; once accepted, they are seen as golden rules that can stay around for years.

Limitations

In conducting this study, a few limitations should be acknowledged that potentially have shaped the coding process and the further interpretations of the findings. The first limitation is that by selecting posts with a minimum of eight responses, you weed out the threads with less discussion about the verification and taxation. Posts with less messages reach a conclusion or consensus earlier meaning there was less discussion or different points of view. Furthermore, some threads did not have any replies which made them less relevant for this specific study rooted in sociology. As this research is focused on the interaction leading up to the value ascription and authenticity certainty or doubts, these richer interactions (thus more responses) have led to better interpretable results.

Second, a potential limitation of this dataset is the uneven distribution of participant activity, with a few individuals contributing more comments than others. Though this recurrence of certain users is in itself a significant feature of the forum's social structure, as high-volume posters can be viewed as informal educators or validators. Their prominence in the dataset reflects the social dynamics that were studied. The occurrence of the users in the dataset can be found in Appendix II.

Thirdly, being an outsider to this collector group, as I had no prior experience or knowledge regarding collecting German World War II memorabilia, it took some background research to obtain some basic knowledge regarding the different troops, divisions and acknowledgements that could influence the value of the piece. This lack of experience can result in missing certain information or lack of understanding of (professional) jargon. Especially the "social cues within messages may make it difficult for researchers to understand the intended meaning of messages, particularly if they are read out-of-context" (Smedley & Coulson, 2021, p. 78). To alleviate this to the best of my ability, for every abbreviation, joke, innuendo I did not understand or had a hunch that I might interpret it in the wrong way, I consolidated with a user of a different WWII forum that I met online earlier in the thesis writing process for advice. Additionally, in the final stages of the writing process I had a talk with a different collector (outside of the dataset) to further discuss these social cues and collector terms.

The last limitation was that the dataset that was compiled only represents 5 percent of the available 1040 topics and a bit more than 6 percent of the total 9952 comments. And while an exploratory triangulation was made by combining interviews (through private messages and email), participant observation, and a thematic analysis, the participant observation is a record of one afternoon at a Militaria fair and does not suffice as strong cross-verification. Hence, most of the insights garnered from that day have been used for the discussion section rather than the primary body of text.

Recommendations

To better understand the implications of these results. future research could expand on this work by researching other on- or offline enclaves where Nazi militaria is traded. To further analyze the "idiosyncratic" (Appadurai, 1986/1990, p. 54) ways in which commodities are shaped, it would be of value to do a comparative analysis between multiple forums and to test these findings with the users through qualitative interviews. The key element of this further research would consist in moving in between the different enclaves in which the collectors find themselves in. At the Militaria Fair in Houten, where multiple vendors and visitors shared their experience with value ascribing and taxation, and how they do or do not use forums for their collection practice. These conversations revealed the multiple other enclaves which the collectors partake in. This included private Discord servers and informal networks formed through fairs or with people that have met online. Investigating these communities, both psychical and digital, would enrich our understanding of the "idiosyncratic" (Appadurai, 1986/1990, p. 54) regimes of value that shape this field.

Discussion

This research has shown that authenticity and value in the context of Nazi militaria collecting are not fixed attributes but are continuously shaped through interaction. On the WWII forum, these qualities are negotiated rather than discovered. Items often do not speak for themselves. Instead, they are made meaningful through a process of evaluation, debate, and social recognition. The judgments made on the forum rely on a combination of material indicators, such as literature references and forensic details, and social cues, including hedging language, peer agreement, and status recognition. Expertise therefore is not defined solely by technical knowledge. It is performed and validated through participation, trust-building, and a track record of credible contributions. This reinforces a knowledge hierarchy, where certain users function as validators and shape the discourse significantly.

Importantly, the uncertainty that surrounds many items is not seen as a failure but as a space of productive tension. Threads often remain open because definitive conclusions cannot be reached. The forum thrives on this uncertainty, with users contributing interpretive heuristics which, once established, often persist as community standards. Both authentic items and reproductions are discussed in depth. Even fantasy pieces, which have no historical precedent, are not dismissed outright. They may gain value through age, provenance, or their role in the collector's narrative. For example, the Dutch para pin modified with a swastika was initially seen as a fantasy item. However, its link to the Dutch SS endowed it with a degree of historical releva. In this way, the social life of objects sometimes allows even dubious artifacts to be folded into the historical narrative. However, fantasy items challenge the norms of collecting and categorization. They cannot be verified through historical records or reference books, and they disrupt the system of verification that the forum relies on. These objects would likely not be accepted in institutional collections and instead exist on the margins. To return to Harrison (2013), preservation is an active choice about what values we wish to carry into the future (p. 4). Yet, fantasy items complicate this decision and challenges more standard ideas about heritage.

Technology further complicates the landscape. With tools like 3D printing, reproductions have become easier to produce, making the assessment of authenticity even more complex. At the same time, the forum environment creates a more democratic model of knowledge sharing. Where collectors once relied on oral history or specialist dealers, they now consult peers. This shift allows broader participation but also increases the risk of misinformation or myth-building which is outlined by Appadurai (1986/1990, p. 54), as one of the dangers of commodification. In addition to enabling collective knowledge-building, forums also act as informal archives that influence how these objects are perceived outside of the collector community. Searching for a fantasy item like the "Hitler bierpul" online brings up the forum thread, meaning the forum helps shape public understanding of even illegitimate items. This underscores the forum's role in the circulation of knowledge and cultural narratives.

To further explore Appadurai's (1986/1990) "regimes of value" (p. 54), I visited several militaria-related spaces beyond the forum. While visiting the militaria fair I came across a bust of Hitler and a gigantic shield adorned with swastikas. Both were constructed out of styrofoam, clearly not original artifacts yet treated as collectibles. Besides that, the helmets, medals and document were cluttered on foldout tables, allowing to be picked up for closer inspection. In stark contrast, a subsequent visit to the National Military Museum in *Soestdijk* showed the same objects in a highly curated context, complete with educational framing and historical narrative At a model built store, German military kits were sold without swastikas on the box. Consumers could apply the symbols themselves using separate decals (see the image 6). The examples further show that each enclave has its own boundaries of what is acceptable.

Image 6 - *Decals for sale in store*

Note. Photograph taken by author

Even in the seemingly open enclave of the forum there are ethical boundaries. In the preface to Axis Militaria subforum, moderators state: "The non-functional display of these symbols is not tolerated here - just like on the rest of the forum" (Peter M., 2004). However, Nazi kitsch *is* discussed and priced on the forum. Revealing a clear discrepancy between the stated rules and actual user behavior. Over the course of my research, it became evident that members often disregard the official guidelines of the subforum.

Ethical concerns also surface in literature. Early on I came across multiple sources that were quite harsh in identifying collecting German militaria as something morally unjust. This was difficult to navigate at times as these claims were often strong worded and not necessarily backed up. Often the items were viewed as relics of that time and the collectors were morally injust or Neo-Nazi's. This quote written by Pearce (1995) really stood out to me:

> We have to conclude that most of those who collect Nazi material now would have actually been Nazis then. Ethics and identity come together, because the collector (blind to the significantly appalling bad taste of Nazi material culture) sees glamour in evil and whishes to identify with it through its relics (p. 195).

Born in 1942, Pearce's proximity to the war is way closer to mine so her relationship to these relics is perhaps more firsthand and understandably more emotional. While this thesis was never a conquest to create a binary between good and evil, it would be unjust not to recognize this stance in literature. While the ethical dimension fell outside the scope of my primary research question, I did talk to collectors about the reasons why they collect. They all described relatively innocent reasons such as childhood curiosity, a general interest to military history that over time shifted to exclusively German objects, or family connections to WWII experiences, including relatives who were imprisoned in labor camps.

Other scholars, such as Grever (2017), have raised concerns about the trivialization of the sensitive past in popular culture. In what ways do forums contribute to this? One concern is that Neo-Nazis could use this forum to verify their objects. Collectors themselves refer to this fringe as the 1% (Scholtz, 2024, p. 155), indicating an awareness of the moral ambiguity surrounding this niche hobby.

Finally, gender and inclusivity emerged as subtle but notable issues. The forum appears to be male-dominated, with members frequently addressing each other as "gentlemen". The homogeneity on the fair was also apparent, white men. On another Dutch WWII forum, access was denied to me possibly because of a female name. Moderators cited concerns about pornographic spam posted by female users, but this also hints at underlying assumptions about who belongs in these spaces.

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Appendices

Appendix I – Codebook

Concepts	Sub-concepts	Description
Historical significance	Rare	Unique or uncommon items.
	Rarity: Common	
	Provenance	Verified or suspected origins
	Association to a key figure / event	Items directly linked or suspected to link to historically significant individuals or happenings.
Legitimization of value	Authenticity certainty	Clear confidence in an item's originality
	Authenticity doubts	Expressed uncertainty or debate
	Monetary value	Perceived worth
	Investment value	Financial investment
	Decoding symbols	Analysis or interpretation of specs
Type of object	Fantasy item	Object that has no material link to WWII and was created after this time.
	Original object altered after WWII	
	Reproduction	
	Forgery	Fraudulent misconception from the seller.
Moral ambiguity	Emotional reaction	Strong feelings elicited by items or discussions.
	Taboo appeal	Attraction due to controversial or morally ambiguous aspects.
	Ethical concern	
Aesthetic appreciation	Craftsmanship	Recognition of high-quality workmanship or design.
Social aspects	Affiliation	Referring to another as friend, colleague, fellow.

	Advice	Providing recommendations or guidance to peers.
	Community policing	Collective efforts to maintain standards.
	Dispute	Not agreeing on claims
	Expertise referral	Deferring to another user's knowledge
	Jokes, sarcasm or irony	Usage of humor in communication
Hierarchy	Moderator censorship	Interventions, decisions and censorship by moderators.
Identity	Historian	Historical accuracy
	Collector	Accumulation and ownership of objects
	Layman	Openly lacking detailed knowledge or experience
	Knowledgeable	Self-proclaimed
	Unknowledgeable	Self-proclaimed
Netiquette	Received thumbs up for contribution	
	Poster thanks users for contribution	
	Poster does not thank users for contribution	
	Adding bibliography / source	

These codes resulted in the following themes:

Themes	Sub-themes	Description
Constructing and performing expertise	Hierarchies of knowledge	Visible stratification of experts to novices
	Specialization and niches	Deep but narrow expertise
	Humility	Self-presentation strategies such as "I am not an expert but..."
	Discursive authority	Use of technical language, catalogues, provenance documents and references to signal expertise.
	Recognition and validation of experts	Community endorsements, recognition achieved over time
	Mentorship	Advice to newer collectors, educational guidance
Practices of authenticity verification	Quasi-forensic methods	Batch numbers, maker codes, UV-light tests, macro photography
	Knowledge systems and reference sources	Use of (expensive) books, archives and private databases
	Default suspicion	It is easier to spot a fake than an authentic piece
	Provenance skepticism	Provenance met with suspicion (e.g., found in wall, gift from friend)
Negotiating value in the marketplace	Taxation and pricing	Potential influence by sellers on the forum
	Repro, kitsch and fantasy	Moral coding of reproductions, fakes and post-war altered pieces.
	Cynicism and seller (dis)trust	Shared list of untrustworthy dealers, personal scam stories
	Moderators' dual role	Credibility of moderators who also sell items; negotiated trust.

	Appreciation for object despite authenticity doubts	For example, "It's still a nice card"- when referring to a reproduction of a signed picture of Adolf Hitler
Community governance and boundary maintenance	Informal policing	Collective monitoring to enforce community and forum standards.
	Communication styles	Contrast between forensic (fact-driven) and emotional or value-driven language.
	Sarcasm or irony as boundary work	Usage of wit or sarcasm to discredit claims.

Appendix II - Frequency of users in dataset

User		Occurrence in dataset
A		37
C		28
R	Moderator	20
I		20
B		16
M		16
D		16
AA		12
U		11
V	Moderator and admin	9
E		9
BB		7
O		7
L		6
CC		6
DD		5
K		5
EE		6
FF		5
GG		5
HH		5
J		5
II		5
JJ		5

KK		5
LL		5
MM		4
NN		4
OO	Moderator	7
PP		4
Q	Moderator	4
V		4
QQ		4
RR		3
SS		3
TT		3
UU		3
VV		3
WW		2
XX		2
YY		2
ZZ		2
AAA		2
BBB	Moderator and admin	2
CCC		2
N		1
F		1
DDD		1
EEE		1
FFF		1
GGG		1

HHH	1
III	1
T	1
JJJ	1
LLL	1
MMM	1
NNN	1
OOO	1
PPP	1
QQQ	
	1
RRR	
SSS	1
TTT	1
UUU	1
VVV	1
WWW	1
XXX	1
YYY	1
ZZZ	1
AAAA	1
BBBB	1

The following appendices were separately uploaded on TMS:

Appendix IV – Personal correspondence

Appendix V – Dataset