

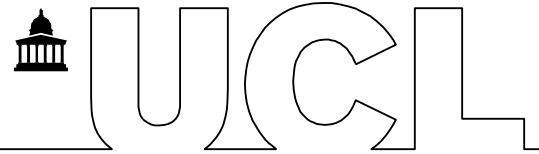
## COURSEWORK TITLE

The impact of car boot sales on vendors' social livelihoods and well-being from a social capital perspective

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## **Abstract**

During the post-epidemic period, China's car boot sales markets have developed rapidly due to the context of boosting domestic demand and their aesthetic and cultural qualities, but they have not received much attention in the academic field. Existing research on Western car boot markets is inconsistent with the characteristics of Chinese boot markets today, focusing on macro perspectives like scale characteristics and government governance models and consumer behaviour, with few studies on practitioners. To fill these research gaps, this paper adopts a qualitative research approach by observing vendors and conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with vendors in three of Shenzhen's well-known car boot markets, aiming to explore the impact of car boot sales in Shenzhen on vendors' motivations, social livelihoods, and social networks. This study integrates social capital theory to examine how social networks among vendors and between vendors and customers contribute to business success and community integration. Findings suggest vendors are primarily driven by economic needs, entrepreneurial aspirations, and social needs. Car boot sales not only increased vendors' economic stability but also promoted social engagement and positively impacted their well-being and sense of community. This study highlights the importance of social capital, demonstrating how social networks contribute to business resilience and community cohesion. It aims to provide new research perspectives on car boot markets and informal employment and offer suggestions for government management.

**Keywords:** Car Boot Sales, Well-being, Social Capital, Shenzhen, Informal Markets

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Current Context

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2021, a new economic phenomenon has emerged in Chinese cities: car boot sales. These markets, which appear between office buildings, outside business districts, by the riverside, and next to city squares, feature car boots arranged in rows and converted into distinctive mini-shops. They have no fixed locations or operating hours and typically appear after sunset, providing a blend of urban charm and cultural flavour as a self-healing space nurtured by the city. Since 2022, car boot sales have gained prominence on new media platforms, with over 80,000 posts about 'car boot sales' on Xiaohongshu and more than 1.5 billion views on related videos on the short-video platform Tiktok.

Car boot sales combine elements of 'street stalls,' and 'night markets,' Originating in the UK, these markets initially resembled flea markets held during summer weekends (Gregson and Crewe, 1997). In contrast, Chinese car boot sales primarily operate at night and focus on selling mostly new goods such as handmade items, coffee, desserts, daily groceries, trendy accessories, games, and pets (Lai et al., 2024). Vendors are predominantly young individuals, including freelancers, shopkeepers, and office workers running side businesses. They often have niche hobbies and use new media to promote themselves. This shift necessitates a reassessment of existing research to understand the dynamics of these markets.

Current research on car boot sales is still dominated by the Western environment (Gregson et al. 1997; Monger 1990; Stone et al. 1996). The majority of studies have focused on the role of car boot sales in Europe and the USA in promoting community charity, recycling and creating and trading with residents (Hibbert et al., 2005). Of these, Crewe and Gregson (1998) found that these markets play an important role in promoting community and corporate philanthropic fundraising activities and acting as popular capital. Gregson's (2013) study showed that although car boot sales promote product reuse, they are mainly influenced by the frugal culture of local consumers. Only a portion of the population is motivated by the idea of protecting the environment and reducing the waste of goods. In contrast, in terms of studies of informal markets in China, researchers have focused mainly on the macro level, including

regional economic effects and government regulatory barriers (Huang, 2009; Jiang and Wang, 2022). Studies have tended to neglect the micro-level of practitioner behaviour and experience. This has led to a lack of understanding of vendors' motivations for participating in markets, trading market interactions, and economic and cultural influences. Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap by investigating vendors' motivations for participating in car boot sales, the impact of these markets on their welfare, and the role of social networks in their sales process.

The study aims to explore three key objectives: (1) What motivates vendors to engage in car boot sales? (2) What impact have car boot sales had on vendors' social and economic livelihood? (3) How do social networks and relationships formed at car boot sales influence business success and community integration?

This paper focuses on the emerging business of car boot sales from a micro-individual behavioural perspective, offering a new view on the study of car boot markets and informal employment segmentation. Practically, the study can guide policymakers and community organizers in developing supportive policies and practices for informal markets. Additionally, understanding the role of car boot sales in urban cultural and economic resilience can enhance the management and sustainability of these markets, fostering thriving communities.

Beginning with a review of existing literature on car boot sales and related fields, this paper will systematically outline the historical background, current development, and key research gaps, with a focus on vendor motivations, social influences, and the impact of social networks. Subsequently, the paper will detail the research methodology, emphasizing how vendor motivations, social interactions, and the role of social networks were explored through qualitative and quantitative methods. In the next section, the findings of the study will be analysed in depth, echoing the three research questions posed earlier. Finally, the paper will specifically interpret the research findings, discuss the dual implications of the theoretical and practical aspects of this research, make relevant recommendations for multiple stakeholders, and explore aspects of future academic research in this area, aiming to provide new insights into this evolving and emerging market.

## **1.2 Research questions and objectives**

This research tries to answer the following three research questions:

### **(1) What are the motivations and factors behind the decision of vendors to enter car boot sales?**

This question aims to explore the main reasons why vendors participate in car boot sales. By understanding these diverse motivations of individuals, a micro perspective can be taken to understand the immediate reasons why trunking has flourished. It will reveal whether vendors are motivated by the need for income growth, entrepreneurial goals and aspirations, social interaction, personal interest or a combination of these factors.

### **(2) What kind of impact have car boot sales had on the social livelihood of vendors?**

This question explores how participation in car boot sales as an activity affects multiple aspects of a supplier's life from multiple perspectives, such as economic growth, expansion of social relationships, mental health or a combination of these effects. It aims to detail whether changes in income, social networks, community integration and life satisfaction make a difference to suppliers. In addition, it assesses whether car boot sales increase or decrease the social and economic well-being of suppliers.

### **(3) How do social networks and relationships formed at car boot sales, both among vendors and between vendors and buyers, influence the business success and community integration of vendors?**

This question examines how social networks affect supplier experience and sales outcomes in car boot sales. It covers two main types of interpersonal relationships in the marketplace, including support and co-operation between individual suppliers and communication and interaction with buyers. The study aims to reveal how social capital plays a role in informal markets from its perspective.



## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Livelihood Theory**

Livelihood is seen by many as a comprehensive and complex concept. It encompasses not only the financial resources used by individuals but also the social and cultural techniques employed to attain well-being and social inclusion. This review aims to comprehensively examine the historical and theoretical evolution of livelihood theory, analyse various perspectives, and demonstrate how this research contributes to existing knowledge. The review starts with an introduction to fundamental ideas and frameworks, then analyses current debates and methodologies, and ultimately identifies gaps in the literature while explaining how this study aims to address these gaps.

There have been several important contributions to livelihood theory development. Starting with Amartya Sen who talked about rights and capabilities, emphasizing that livelihoods aren't just about economic sustenance but also about how people access resources and opportunities (Sen, 1982). On this basis, Chambers and Conway introduced the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), which highlights the mix of social, financial, human, natural, and physical resources in shaping livelihoods (Chambers et al., 1992). This was significant since it offered a holistic perspective, acknowledging that livelihoods are sustained by intricate networks of assets interacting with broader social and environmental settings. Chambers and Conway's SLF emphasised the need for a holistic strategy that concurrently addresses economic, social, and environmental problems. Scoones (1998) elaborated on this concept by discussing "livelihood strategies", which examine the combination of various resources used by people to achieve their livelihood objectives. This illustrates the flexible and dynamic characteristics of livelihood processes in response to changing circumstances. Sen, Chambers, Scoones and Ellis (2000) jointly emphasise the importance of the need to consider economic, social and environmental factors simultaneously in understanding livelihoods in the current era. However, they each have a different focus: Sen primarily examines the relationship between individual capabilities rights and livelihoods, Chambers and Scoones emphasise economic and asset-based livelihood frameworks, and Ellis supports diversification strategies. These differences point to the need for an integrated framework that effectively combines all of the factors covered above, thereby deepening the

understanding of the concept of social livelihoods.

Beyond the basic discussion above, there are some additional debates. One important matter is how regular livelihood frameworks fit in today's cities. While Ellis (2000) says income diversification is key for dealing with economic changes, Rakodi (2002) puts a question mark on this in urban settings, where opportunities and social links are much different from rural parts. This disparity indicates that the SLF, originally designed for rural environments, may need modifications to function well in dynamic urban settings, such as informal marketplaces like car boot sales.

Another discussion concerns the weight of social and cultural factors in sustaining livelihoods. The traditional approach to livelihoods research is seen as focusing too much on measurable economic indicators and ignoring important components such as psychological and emotional factors. Bebbington (1999) states that the traditional approach only assesses livelihoods at a macroeconomic level and ignores the significance of the individual. Morse, McNamara, and Acholo (2009) argue that for a more holistic understanding of livelihoods, factors such as emotional and psychological must be taken into account. Scoones (2009) supports the traditional frameworks but argues that these past frameworks fail to encompass the new dimensions that are currently valued by society. These discussions suggest that we need a framework that includes both economic and other detailed components to address the complexity of livelihoods.

Recent research has shifted in methodology from a single to a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data. De Haan and Zoomers (2005) emphasise the importance of in-depth qualitative case studies to understand the contextual knowledge of the research participants. In contrast, Ellis (2000) advocates the use of quantitative data to make cross-sectional comparisons between people from different backgrounds in the same area. Whilst each of these approaches has its focus in terms of research perspectives, they are complementary in enhancing our understanding of the complexity of livelihood strategies.

While considerable progress has been made in existing research to understand livelihoods from economic, social and environmental perspectives, the breakdown is still insufficient, especially in urban settings. This can greatly

affect the applicability of frameworks like SLF which were originally designed for rural areas. There are also gaps in current research on aspects such as the psychological and emotional health of car boot market vendors. This study will build on these aspects and aims to deepen our understanding of the concept of urban livelihoods by exploring the impact of car boot sales on the well-being of traders.

## **2.2 Social capital theory**

Social capital theory focuses on the impact of content social networks and human interactions on individual and collective outcomes. The concept was originally developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and James Coleman (1988). They see social capital as benefits derived from networks, norms and ties of shared advantage, associated with trust, intergroup reciprocity and community participation and cohesion.

Bourdieu (1986) was the first scholar to elaborate on this concept, focusing on the perspective of how social interactions in interpersonal interactions can lead to valuable resources and opportunities for both parties. He emphasised that social capital involves networks and relationships and that these provide the potential for people to access the corresponding economic, cultural and symbolic capital. Grasping this perspective is crucial to the study of car boot sales, as traders may utilise social networks within their bazaar to gather market information and seek help from their peers. Granovetter's (1973) seminal book, *The Power of Weak Relationships*, provides a complementary perspective in that weak relationships (casual friends and strangers) may be more effective in accessing new resources and opportunities than strong relationships (close friends and family) because weak relationships may develop a wider range of interpersonal relationships. His argument can be applied to the car boot sale scenario, as in this new type of space, sellers often utilise wider, less intimate networks to identify emerging market trends and potential opportunities.

The phenomenon of declining social capital in American communities was further explored by Putnam (2000), who found a clear correlation between declining social capital and declining community involvement and trust. Whilst both Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000) emphasise the importance of social capital in enhancing community cohesion and civic engagement, they have different emphases. Coleman focuses on specific components of social capital,

such as social networks and obligations among members. In contrast, Putnam takes a more macro perspective, analysing the wider social consequences of social capital, including its impact on the democratic process. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) add a new research perspective by linking the concept of social capital to intellectual capital, showing how social networks within organisations can facilitate information exchange and foster business creativity, thus extending the applicability of social capital beyond the inherent community context. The phenomenon of car boot sales may similarly fit into this context, where social and intellectual capital intersect to foster shared economic growth and knowledge sharing among members. Recent studies have expanded other perspectives, such as Huggins et al. (2012) who examined its role in the development of the creative potential of organisational members, organisational innovativeness and high levels of innovation performance. Similarly, Woolcock and Narayan (2010) examine the role of social capital in local poverty reduction and systemic governance.

Although many studies have fully examined the impact of social capital in different cultural and economic contexts, they have only focussed on a specific group of people. While Coleman (1990) and Putnam (1993) have demonstrated the positive impact of social capital on community participation and economic success, it is just as potentially problematic, such as the resulting exclusion of people or unequal distribution of resources within the community. Field (2003), Kawachi and Berkman (2003), by focusing on the relationship between social capital and health equity, further reveal that the benefits of social capital tend to be concentrated within privileged groups, thus potentially exacerbating the negative effects of inequality. In addition, car boot sales encompass the convergence of the traditional characteristics of offline stalls and online social media, and social capital may play a different role in this context. However, it is unclear how social media shapes these connections or how social, economic and cultural capital interact here. These research gaps point to the need for an in-depth study of social capital in various informal markets, especially in areas of rapid economic development.

## **2.3 Informal employment**

Informal employment refers to all forms of work performed outside the scope of formal labour laws and protections. The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines the informal sector as consisting of small-scale producers and service

providers, mainly in urban areas of developing countries. Typically, these people often face significant challenges such as income insecurity and unemployment due to lower economic levels and outdated memories (ILO, 1991). In addition, workers in this sector may have limited access to the labour market because they are not registered and enrolled in official institutions and do not have access to the financial resources, training or education that are generally available in the formal sector. As a result, they have limited legal protection and social security.

The dual labour market theory provides a useful framework for analysing informal employment. The theory divides the labour market into mainstream and peripheral markets, where the mainstream market consists of stable, well-paid jobs with opportunities for advancement. In contrast, informal employment is a marginal market, characterised by low wages, job insecurity and poor working conditions (Piore, 1979). Thus, the theory emphasises the inequalities faced by those in informal employment. Similarly, the structuralist view sees the formal and informal sectors as interdependent concerns, with the informal sector providing complementary goods and services to the formal economy (Yusuff, 2011). On the other hand, the neo-liberal view argues that some small and micro-enterprises choose to opt for the informal mode of operation by their own choice and the reason for this is to avoid over-regulation and bureaucracy and thus reduce costs. This view emphasises the important and influential role of the regulatory environment in the informal employment model (Thorsen, 2010).

Early research on informal employment in China has been crucial to understanding the rapid growth of car boot markets. For example, Xue and Zhong (2003) analysed the expansion of informal employment in response to regional economic reforms and the restructuring of state-owned enterprises. Their study shows that China's transition to a market economy has further exacerbated informal employment, driven by factors such as rural-urban migration, the transfer of agricultural labour to urban labour, and the need to absorb surplus labour through economic reforms. Over time, in the context of relative material stability, informal employment in China has already shown some of the characteristics of the developed countries' model, having shifted from an unemployment-driven phenomenon to a more diverse pattern of employment.

Recent studies have introduced new perspectives and methods to deepen the understanding of informal employment in China. For example, Wu and Cheng (2016) examined the impact of informal employment on the social mobility of rural migrants. They found that while informal employment brings direct economic benefits, it tends to exacerbate inequality and limit upward mobility. Instead of improving quality of life, informal employment often becomes a 'refuge' for the poor. The study also highlights the importance of taking into account factors such as gender, age, family conditions, marital status, household registration and education when designing policies to improve the mobility of informal workers.

Similarly, Huang and Pang (2018) explore the relationship between informal employment and access to social service resources, revealing that many constraints remain in terms of health insurance and pension coverage. They suggest that local governments need to establish a comprehensive social security system. This is in line with the wider literature, which identifies inadequate social welfare as a key issue in informal economy research, emphasising the need for increased policy support to improve the welfare of informal workers and close the gap with formal employees (Chen, 2012). Furthermore, Li and Zhang (2020) extend this analysis to the "gig economy", a new form of modern informal employment driven by digital platforms. Their study shows that while new internet business models and trade liberalisation have expanded opportunities, challenges such as job insecurity and lack of benefits remain. This reflects the fact that the long-entrenched problems of traditional informal work have still not been fully addressed.

In addition, recent research has explored the complex relationship between the regulatory environment and the prevalence of informal work. Some scholars point to factors such as a strict institutional environment and regulations as the main drivers behind informal entrepreneurship. In particular, they point out that many people turn to informal work due to the recent lack of social support and distrust of formal institutions (Alter Chen, 2005). Similarly, studies have also found that the increase in informal employment in Brazil is linked to increased labour costs and regulations on dismissals, overtime and the impact of trade unions (Almeida and Carneiro, 2012). These findings highlight the driving role of economic and regulatory factors in shaping patterns of informal work.

Despite extensive research on informal employment, most studies have

focussed on the causes of formation and general impacts, with limited exploration of niche markets such as car boot sales (Chen, 2012; Li & Zhang, 2020). In addition, current research tends to emphasise governance perspectives or macro-level features, while paying insufficient attention to individual behaviours and micro-level analyses. To address these gaps, this study will analyse how participation in car boot sale activities affects vendors' income, job security and access to social services.

## **2.4 Car boot sales**

Car boot sales are a unique form of the informal economy. Car owners sell goods directly from their boots in designated public places. These activities take place mainly in the UK and other western countries in markets, car parks and suburbs. According to Portes and Haller (2005), the informal economy is not regulated by the state but can provide participants with a basic income and opportunities for socialising. In this context, car boot sales provide opportunities for individuals, particularly those who are often excluded from formal markets, to raise capital and gain employment. Previous research has demonstrated the important role of the informal economy in supporting marginalised groups, particularly during financial crises. For example, through detailed empirical analyses, Williams (2004) concludes that car boot markets provide resilience to individuals and households facing economic hardship, enabling them to maintain a basic standard of living through low-threshold entrepreneurial opportunities.

In addition, these markets strengthen social interactions and community ties. A follow-up study by Williams and Nadin (2012) further deepens the understanding of car boot markets, emphasising their key role at both the economic and social levels. They point out that car boot markets are not only an important income-generating channel for low-income groups, providing easy access to markets, but also a platform for community building. By facilitating neighbourhood interaction, resource sharing and collective participation, these markets contribute to enhancing social capital. Furthermore, Gregson et al. (2002) reveal that suppliers to these markets are driven not only by economic motives but also by the desire to build and maintain social relationships. Taken together, these studies show that car boot markets serve a dual function, helping practitioners cope with economic challenges and providing them with social support. However, he also noted that existing research has not fully explored the long-term economic or social benefits of such interactions for

suppliers. This gap underscores the need for further research to provide a more complete assessment of the sustainable role of the car boot market in promoting the economic resilience of individuals and communities.

Bromley and Mackie (2009) also observe that while car start markets offer economic flexibility, they are not without their flaws. In particular, they note the precariousness of suppliers' incomes and the lack of formal legal and social protection. In contrast to this view, Smith and Stenning (2006) provide a more critical analysis, questioning whether these markets promote social equality. They argue that the resource advantage of the wealthy can enable them to utilise opportunities within the market more effectively to expand the market, potentially further exacerbating inequality.

Apart from the economic and social dimensions, a growing body of research has begun to focus on the cultural dimensions of car boot sales, particularly mainstream consumerism. Bramall (2013) and Gabrys (2010) have argued that these markets reflect a shift in buyers' and sellers' motivations away from monolithic economic motives towards more sustainable and ethical consumption. However, the extent to which car boot sales can be an alternative to mainstream consumerism remains contested. On the one hand, Bramall (2013) emphasises the moral motivations behind participation in these markets, suggesting that they can act as a countervailing force to mainstream consumer culture. On the other hand, Bowman (2007) rebuts this argument, claiming that despite offering an alternative retail model, these markets still operate within the framework of traditional consumerism. Similarly, Crewe and Gregson (1998) are sceptical that car boot markets can truly offer a route out of consumer culture, arguing that they remain deeply rooted in the capitalist system of commodification and exchange. These markets may represent a modified form of consumerism rather than a radical alternative.

There are two research gaps in the current literature. Whilst some scholars have identified a role for social interactions in car boot sales, they have tended to view social interactions as secondary to economic outcomes and have failed to fully explore how these networks contribute to suppliers' access to resources, social capital and psychological well-being. Whilst Granovetter's (1973) weak ties theory provides a useful framework, it has yet to be rigorously applied to the car boot market. For this reason, this study could focus on the following aspects: Firstly, systematically analyse how social networks are formed in the



car boot market, especially in this dynamic and informal environment. Secondly, research should investigate how these networks help suppliers to access resources, cope with market fluctuations, expand their customer base and obtain financial support. Finally, future research should examine how these interactions affect suppliers' overall well-being, including their sense of social integration, community belonging, and life satisfaction.

A second major gap in the literature relates to the lack of cross-regional studies. Although car boot sales are a global phenomenon, most studies have focused on specific regions in the West. China's car boot market exhibits very different characteristics from those found in Western settings. Existing studies have not yet fully explored this phenomenon and lack a systematic study of the adaptive, institutionalised and supplier perspectives of the car boot market in non-Western contexts. Therefore, there is an urgent need for further cross-regional and cross-cultural empirical research to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse development paths of the car boot market in different geographical and socio-economic contexts.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Case study**

I chose Shenzhen as the case study for this research because it possesses unique socio-economic conditions and a thriving informal economy that make it a typical location to study the phenomenon of car boot sales in China. The city has developed into one of China's leading innovation centres in the last decade, ranking among the top of China's heavily urbanised cities in terms of economic output and individual entrepreneurship. It is also rich in new industries and has a diverse range of practitioners (Wang et al., 2009). Due to the high level of digital engagement among residents, owners of car boot markets often use several well-known Chinese social platforms - such as Tiktok and Xiaohongshu - to promote their products and attract customers, creating a hybrid offline and online market experience. The combination of digital platforms and informal economic activities sets Shenzhen apart from other cities in China and makes it an ideal case study to examine how the informal economy is developing in this new context. Another key reason why I chose Shenzhen is that it has a thriving night-time economy compared to other northern Chinese cities. This is one of the major features that distinguishes

Chinese car boot markets from those in the West. The fact that Shenzhen's night-time economy accounts for approximately 60 per cent of its daily economic activity demonstrates the importance of night markets, leisure activities and the informal economy in the city's economic development (Zhang et al., 2022). Furthermore, unlike many other cities with strict regulatory policies or crackdowns on street vendors, the local government in Shenzhen implemented relatively liberal policies after the covid-19 outbreak that recognised the role of informal markets in promoting economic diversity and entrepreneurship (Jiang and Wang, 2022). This contributed to car boot sales becoming an emerging economic trend in the city, providing a convenient and flexible business platform for vendors as well as a space for leisure and recreation for residents. Based on these factors, I have selected Shenzhen as a case study.

### **3.2 Research design**

This study will use the constructivist paradigm and the interpretivist paradigm as the basis for its qualitative research design. These paradigms were chosen to explore how participants in the informal economy construct meaning around their activities and how they interpret their role in these markets.

Constructivism recognises that reality is socially constructed and that it is dependent on the environment, meaning that individuals develop their understanding of the world through their interactions with others and the environment (Charmaz, 2006). The reason why this paradigm is relevant to this study is that the Shenzhen car boot vendors are engaged in a relatively new economic activity, and they construct their meanings and understandings of the phenomenon as they engage in it. Different vendors may have different explanations as to why they engage in this activity - some may see it as a way to increase their income stream, while others may see it as a media for their creative expression or a platform for communication and interaction with strangers. By adopting a constructivist framework, this study can explore how these individuals construct their economic and social identities in informal market spaces as well as explore the role of social networks and relationships in car boot sales.

Interpretivism complements constructivism by focusing on the meaning that individuals give to their behaviours and experiences. This paradigm

emphasises the importance of understanding social phenomena from the participant's perspective, recognising that an individual's behaviour is influenced by their interpretation of the world around them (Schwandt, 2000). In this study, interpretivism allows the researcher to investigate in depth the subjective meanings of suppliers' participation in the market. For example, suppliers may interpret their role in the markets as a form of community involvement, entrepreneurial activity, or even a silent protest against stricter forms of employment. Through an interpretive lens, this study will explore how these suppliers interpret their relationships with customers, other suppliers and wider social networks. This approach is essential to capture how suppliers view their participation in the informal economy and how they respond to the social and economic challenges associated with it.

### **3.3 Project Description**

The study project will last 12 weeks and is segmented into three primary stages for thorough data collecting and analysis on car boot sales in Shenzhen.

The first phase (weeks 1-2) includes scope delineation and preliminary fieldwork. This step entails touring prominent car boot sale venues, including Shenzhen Tea Expo, Houhai Hui, and Jinxiu Zhonghua. These venues, recognised for their attractiveness and varied offers, will be analysed to comprehend market dynamics, including the sorts of products supplied, vendor and consumer demographics, and the market ambience. The observations will enhance the study's focus and formulate precise interview questions for the subsequent phase.

In Phase 2 (Weeks 3-8), the core data collection process will employ two primary methods: participant observation and semi-structured interviews. For the participant observation component, the researcher will attend car boot sales at various times, particularly during the evening peak and weekends when the market is most active. The observation will be non-participatory, meaning that the researcher will observe and take detailed field notes, but will not be directly involved in the transaction process. Emphasis will be placed on documenting vendor-customer interactions, the use of market space, the role of social media in promoting sales, and interactions between vendors. With consent, audio and video recordings will supplement the field notes to ensure a rich and comprehensive dataset.

At the same time, the researcher will conduct semi-structured interviews with selected suppliers. These interviews will delve into suppliers' motivations for engaging in car boot sales, the challenges they face, and how they use digital platforms for outreach. Each interview will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes and will be transcribed and then analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis will then be used to analyse the findings,

Phase 3 (weeks 9-12) will focus on data analysis and integration. The researcher will integrate the data collected through observations and interviews. Thematic analysis will be used to identify recurring patterns and themes related to the experiences, motivations, and social interactions of car boot sale vendors. Data will be systematically coded to highlight key themes such as economic survival strategies, community-building practices, and the impact of digital technology on the informal economy. Based on this analysis, preliminary conclusions will be drawn and areas for further investigation will be identified for future research.

### **3.4 Observation and Interview Methods**

Observation methods provide direct insights into the real-time interactions and behaviours of suppliers and customers in car boot sales in Shenzhen. Firstly, observation allows me to access unobtrusive data about market dynamics, including the various types of organisations in the market, the flow of interactions between suppliers and customers, and the informal social networks that form within these spaces (Silverman, 2016). Observing interactions directly allows me to gather contextual information that might not be captured through interviews or surveys alone (Angrosino, 2007). Bryman (2016) emphasizes that observation helps understand the continuum of events and the social context influencing behaviour. This method complements semi-structured interviews by providing insights into the environment where vendors operate, enhancing the quality of interview data. For example, observing vendors' social media promotions enables me to ask relevant questions about how these strategies affect in-person sales (Jorgensen, 1989). This cross-validation between observations and interviews strengthens the reliability and validity of the findings, as noted by Patton (2002).

The main purpose of my choice of semi-structured interviews was to increase

flexibility and enhance the depth of the interview process. This is because it is effective in exploring the nuanced experiences and specific motivations of car boot sale vendors in Shenzhen. Semi-structured interviews provide a balanced approach, which on the one hand provides enough structure and framework to direct the dialogue towards relevant topics related to the research questions. On the other hand, it allows the researcher the flexibility to add new topics as the interview progresses, exploring naturally occurring or self-interested elements that have not been noted in the preparation of previous interview outlines. The advantages of this structure are particularly important in a research environment such as car boot sales, where the phenomenon is still evolving and its dynamics are not yet fully understood. Adapting the questions and following up on emerging themes ensures that this study captures the full range of vendors' experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Additionally, the semi-structured format will help assist the researcher in obtaining richer personal narratives of vendors concerning informal employment, which is crucial in understanding the subjective factors and meaning-making aspects of vendor participation. Through this approach, I will be able to gather detailed qualitative data about vendors' economic motivations, daily challenges, and their social interactions in informal market spaces (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

### **3.5 Sampling and Procedures**

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted in this study using snowball sampling. Participants in an informal market such as car boot sales may be involved in a wide range of social networks that are not easily accessible through traditional recruitment strategies outside of the market. A snowball sampling approach would allow me to more easily utilise these social networks to reach owners who may not be identifiable through direct observation (Noy, 2008). The process started with a group of participants who initially agreed to be interviewed, and who then recommended other interviewees from their social networks who met the objectives of the study, creating a 'snowball effect' that gradually increased the sample size. Next, because of the trust-centred nature of these markets, reliance on personal endorsement promotes trust between researchers and participants, which may increase the likelihood of being interviewed and the richness of information exchanged during the interview process. Thirdly, the snowball sampling approach allows this study to encompass a wide variety of participants, such as beginners to experienced suppliers, across several product categories and varying degrees of market involvement. This diversity is crucial to understanding the overall pattern of car

boot sales in Shenzhen, including how vendors join the market, operate their stalls, and interact with consumers and colleagues.

The recruitment process continued until theoretical saturation, meaning that no new themes or important insights emerged in subsequent interviews. By the 15th interview of this study, the data became repetitive and no new information was found, indicating that the sample was sufficiently representative and comprehensive, confirming the saturation point and completeness of the data. Thus, the full details of the car boot sales market can be effectively captured (Guest et al., 2006).

Respondents were coded anonymously at a later stage, and the interview data appearing in this paper were coded as X\*-Y, where X denotes the identity of the respondent (vendor), \* represents the number of a particular type of interviewee, and Y represents the first letter of a particular interviewee's last name, e.g., 'V1-M' represents the first interview to the boot stall vendor, whose surname or first name has the initial letter M. Table 1 shows the basic information of the interviewees.

Table 1 Summary of basic information of the interviewees

ID	Gender	Participation Frequency	Product Type	Main or Side Business
V1-M	Male	7 days a week	Food and Beverages	Main Business
V2-N	Female	3 days a week	Food and Beverages	Side Business
V3-B	Male	5 days a week	Children's Products	Main Business
V4-W	Male	5 days a week	Trendy Toys	Side Business
V5-W	Female	1 day a week	Second-hand Goods	Side Business
V6-L	Male	7 days a week	Food and Beverages	Main Business
V7-L	Female	5 days a week	Trendy Toys and Figurines	Side Business
V8-Z	Male	2 days a week	Handicrafts	Main Business
V9-W	Female	4 days a week	Beauty and Skincare	Side Business

V10-Q	Male	3 days a week	Home Decor	Side Business
V11-S	Couple	2 days a week	Food and Beverages	Side Business
V12-Z	Female	7 days a week	Fashion and Accessories	Main Business
V13-L	Female	4 days a week	Handicrafts	Main Business
V14-L	Couple	3 days a week	Trendy Toys and Figurines	Side Business
V15-H	Female	4 days a week	Food and Beverages	Main Business

### 3.6 Ethical Considerations

Participants' rights, privacy and autonomy are protected throughout the research process. Informed consent is a fundamental part of the research process. I will provide each participant with a detailed information sheet, a document that will ensure that participants are fully informed about the research, the potential risks and benefits, and how their data will be used. All personally identifiable information will be removed from the data for confidentiality purposes. Participants will be assigned numbers to ensure their identity remains anonymous. In addition, the researchers are committed to minimising disruption to participants' normal business activities. Considering that many vendors work concentrated hours and rely on car boot sales for their primary livelihood, interviews and observations will be scheduled at times that are most convenient for participants. Flexible scheduling will ensure that participants' participation in the study will not interfere with their selling activities. By carefully addressing these ethical issues, this study aims to build a relationship of trust with the participants, ensuring that their rights are respected and that the study is conducted in a manner consistent with best ethical practices.

### 3.7 Limitations

It is important to recognise that there are still some limitations in these research approaches. First, while Shenzhen is a valuable case study for examining the intersection of the informal economy and digital platforms in the Chinese context, the city's distinguishing characteristics may likewise limit the generalisability of the findings to other less-developed regions in China or

globally (He & Qian, 2017). Future research could address this issue by conducting comparative studies in different cities to improve the robustness and generalisability of the findings.

Second, although this study adopted a qualitative design based on constructivist and interpretive paradigms, it may not have been able to fully capture quantitative aspects such as specific economic impacts, market size, vendor incomes and other relevant demographics in assessing the impacts of car boot markets on the social livelihoods of vendors. Future research could adopt a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative insights with quantitative data to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the economic and social dynamics of car boot sales.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 Motivations and factors for vendor participation**

In analysing the motivations of suppliers to participate in car boot markets, I found that financial incentives are the main drivers. These motivations include not only single economic income generation, but also broader factors such as life satisfaction, experimentation in entrepreneurship, and risk management to resist downward economic pressures. Vendor motivations also do not necessarily exist singularly and may consist of a combination of market, social, economic, and environmental factors. Car boot markets, as part of the informal economy, provide suppliers with greater flexibility and easy access to markets. This enables them to engage in diverse and emerging business exploration with minimal barriers to entry. Understanding the participation factors of suppliers in this context can therefore not only elucidate the unique attractiveness of the informal economy, but also further reflect on its role in supporting small-scale entrepreneurship and livelihood security.

#### **(1) Economic Motivation**

First and foremost, financial gain is the immediate motivation for many suppliers to participate in vehicle launch sales. The COVID-19 pneumonia outbreak hit the global economy hard, further worsening the economic situation of low-income and part-time workers. In addition, several businesses closed down on a wide scale and unemployment rose, particularly in the service and retail sectors. In this context, car boot sales provided a low-cost platform to generate



additional income and support household finances. Individuals who previously relied on formal employment have begun to look for opportunities in the informal economy, using car boot sales as an important way of relieving financial stress. For example, respondent V2-N, a full-time mother, mentioned, “I was laid off from my company due to the severe recession. I could not find a full-time job while taking care of my children. But by selling homemade desserts and cakes at the market, I was able to earn extra income every month to cover household expenses.”

In addition, the car boot market attracts middle-class families who use the platform to optimise resources for household items and earn extra income. For example, respondent V9-W shared, “Because of the epidemic, we bought a lot of things online, which led to hoarding of too many items. There are also a lot of items stored inside the warehouse that we can't even use up. So every few months, we sort out what we don't use and sell it at the market. This not only frees up space in the house but also earns us extra income for our family trips.” This behaviour thus illustrates the adaptability of car boot sales across different socio-economic groups. By reintroducing unused items to the market, vendors not only make a financial gain, but also promote recycling and sustainable consumption. This phenomenon is supported by Gregson et al. (2013), who state that informal economic activities, such as car boot sales, offer groups from different income levels a flexible way to generate income, which has the advantage of maximising economic benefits through the reuse of resources and secondary consumption.

Furthermore, car boot sales provide an attractive platform for individuals who wish to start a business but lack the capital to establish a formal enterprise. Compared to formal business environments, car boot sales do not require high rents, licences or complex operations. As a result, vendors can enter the market at a low initial cost, interact directly with customers, and receive immediate feedback on product demand, pricing strategies, and market trends. For example, V13-L, a handicraft seller, said, “I've always wanted to open a handicraft shop, but after the epidemic, rent and operating costs went up for many brick-and-mortar shops. By selling through car boot sales, I was able to test my products at a lower cost and see how my customers reacted. This helped me adjust my product line and provided a strong data reference value for my later opening of an online shop.” This illustrates how, unlike traditional business environments, car boot sales offer vendors the flexibility to choose the

frequency of their participation based on their schedules and finances, thereby avoiding the high fixed costs and long-term commitment risks associated with formal business.

## **(2) Market and Environmental Factors**

Market and environmental factors play a key role in facilitating the development of car boot sales. These factors include supportive local government policies, a relatively liberal regulatory environment, and diverse venue space. The context of the pandemic outbreak, in particular, further fuelled the growth of car boot sales as it encouraged people to move from indoor group activities to outdoor activities.

Firstly, the increase in people's outdoor activities during the pandemic fundamentally changed people's consumption habits, contributing significantly to the diversity of this type of market. The pandemic caused people to start reducing recreational activities in confined spaces. Instead, they opted for safer outdoor activities such as camping and car boot sales. Thus, this shift towards outdoor activities, coupled with car culture, has led to an increased focus on car boot sales. Many residents, especially car culture enthusiasts, began utilising and decorating the boot of their cars, thus contributing to the growing popularity of car boot sales. In addition, during the epidemic, many campers turned their leisure activities into business opportunities, particularly selling drinks and snacks through boot stalls at campsites.

At the same time, the liberalisation of regional policies and regulations provided policy support for attracting a large number of suppliers into car boot sales. For example, starting in March 2020, several regions across the country promoted a 'stall economy' during the pandemic to boost employment and economic recovery. Cities such as Chengdu and Nanjing introduced policies to allow businesses to set up stalls, while Zhengzhou, Changsha and Xi'an gradually liberalised the strict regulation of stall operations. In addition, the Central Civilisation Office has made it clear that 'occupying parking roads' will not be included in the assessment of civilised cities, providing further policy support for the 'stall economy'. It can be seen that in this case, the government, taking into account the increased economic uncertainty during a pandemic, hopes to stimulate urban consumption through these measures. Through deregulation, employment opportunities were provided for individuals who were unable to access the formal market. This is how interviewee V10-Q describes his

motivation for getting involved in car boot sales: “The country introduced policy support in 2020 to encourage the expansion of the grassroots economy. After the epidemic, people preferred outdoor activities, such as at the river, where people preferred to spend their money. I see this as a new opportunity to start a business.”

### **(3) Social and Cultural Motivations**

In the context of car boot sales, social and cultural motives not only determine the frequency of supplier participation, but also shape their overall market experience and interaction patterns, reinforcing their reliance on this informal economic activity. These social and cultural motives include social interaction, emotional support, community belonging, identity and the accumulation of cultural capital.

Social interaction and emotional support are crucial in the dynamics of car boot sales. As an open and informal marketplace, car boot sales allow suppliers to interact frequently with customers and other suppliers. In addition, this selling method creates a unique cultural atmosphere where sellers and buyers can share their favourite cultures and connect with like-minded individuals. These interactions not only help vendors make business connections, but also enhance emotional support. Interviewee V15-H mentioned, “I come here every weekend not only to sell but also to meet with old customers and other vendors to talk about the week.” Thus, social interactions at the car boot market can be effective in reducing loneliness, especially for those who lack formal social outlets. This regular social interaction not only fulfils the suppliers' social needs but also provides them with psychological and emotional support, increasing their motivation for subsequent participation.

In a further way, acquiring a sense of community belonging and identity are some of the main social motivations for participation in car boot markets. These markets are usually closely related to the local community. Through regular participation, vendors gradually integrate into the surrounding social structure. For example, one vendor stated, “I like the diverse atmosphere of our community. We reach out, get to know different people, and share our stories in the process, which is fun.” Thus, this long-term involvement helps vendors develop a unique identity in the community and strengthens their sense of belonging. Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1979) suggests that an individual's identity is largely shaped by their role in the group and their sense of belonging.

Thus, through frequent participation and interaction, sellers are transformed from mere economic participants to active community members, resulting in a stronger sense of social and psychological fulfilment.

The car boot market also provides a unique platform for vendors to accumulate cultural capital. Bourdieu (1986) defines cultural capital as a non-economic resource acquired through cultural practices and artistic expression and notes that it can be transformed into social and economic capital in specific social contexts. In the course of my research, I found that many businesses not only accumulate economic capital by selling items that reflect their style, such as handicrafts or vintage goods but also express their cultural identity and aesthetic values through these products. For example, in one interview, a vendor expressed her passion for hip-hop by selling hip-hop records, stating, "These goods are not just items to sell. They represent a culture, a way of life. It can convey my attitude and philosophy of life." As such, this form of cultural expression allows vendors to build a unique personal identity in car boot sales while creating a deeper emotional connection with customers through shared cultural symbols.

## **4.2 Impacts on vendors' social livelihoods**

As a particular type of informal economy, car boot sales have a profound and multifaceted impact on the social livelihoods and well-being of traders. Not only in terms of diversified incomes, but also in terms of social interactions and quality of life, and rich life experiences. This dissertation aims to combine the data collected from the literature analysis and interviews in an attempt to develop a more systematic analytical framework to reveal the various impacts of this emerging business model at the economic, social and psychological levels.

Car boot sales provide a platform for suppliers to expand their income streams and innovate for growth, especially practitioners who have suffered challenges in formal employment. Following the COVID-19 phase of the epidemic, more and more people are turning to car boot sales to make ends meet after losing their formal jobs. This is because car boot sales offer some unique advantages not available in formal employment - low barriers to entry, low taxes, and subsidised local government funding. This enables people from the local community, including marginalised individuals, to participate in the market. As

interviewee V13-L stated, 'I was unemployed for a few months due to the widespread impact of the epidemic and had to rely on selling car boot sales to earn an income as a new avenue of employment.' The popularity and growing popularity of car boot sales due to higher financial rewards has also brought more practitioners the confidence and assets to commit themselves to deepening their careers in the industry and transforming it from a side business to a main business. As interviewee V12-Z pointed out: "For me, it should not be a problem to receive 40 to 50 customers in one night. The best time to do business is during the summer and holidays, when my daily turnover is over 4,000 RMB. Isn't that more than I used to earn from going to work every day?" Moreover, it is not only creating short-term benefits in car boot sales. Through the experience learnt in the market, suppliers continue to improve their business skills and adopt more product innovations and marketing strategies to stay competitive and promote long-term benefits. This is in line with Granovetter's (1973) view that participation in informal markets develops practitioners' business competencies, which can be re-utilised in the wider entrepreneurial environment. For example, supplier V2-N mentions, "Due to the homogenisation of the drinks market, I have to constantly improve my milk tea recipes and ingredients to cater for the tastes of younger consumers. It's exhausting, but my revenue has increased many times over. I think the effort pays off." This example highlights how the dynamic nature of car boot sales enables suppliers to respond quickly to changing market demands.

Social networks in getting jobs, and finding entrepreneurial chances, especially in areas where resources are not enough or where markets are unreliable, play a key role. For people from different family backgrounds, social networks try to make up for the differences in getting opportunities (Wang et al., 2018). V13-L said, "Through participating in car boot sales, I've connected with other vendors selling different types of products and learned about various industries." This means car boot sales do not only give quick economic benefits but also help in building social ties. More so, some sellers use car boot sales with clear plans to expand their network and customer base. V3-B and V4-W both stressed the need to cleverly pick target customers at car boot sales, which leads to better deals and recognizing business chances. V3-B said car boot sales helped him to grow his fan base, even growing three WeChat groups, boosting his reach to customers. Also, he saw networking with other sellers as useful, saying it helped him link up with specialized suppliers from fairs, giving important business help for his main venture. This process shows how car boot sales are

not just places to make money but also spots to gain long-term social capital. V12-Z remarked, "A relationship with a cake vendor has continued to this day, and we still maintain business contacts," showing the lasting social ties made through car boot sales. These examples show that car boot sales are more than just trade places, they play an important role in growing networks and deepening connections.

Car boot sales also have good effects on vendors' mental health and how they live. From the side of mental health, being part of car boot sales lets vendors have more control, a sense of success, and a clear mission. The flexibility of car boot sales lets vendors choose what products to sell, decide working hours and how often to take part. Such control is empowering for those who feel stuck in regular jobs, allowing them to take back control over their work, which helps their mental health. Besides money, a better life is shown by more social interactions. A14-Y talked about the importance of these interactions, saying, "Through participating in the market, I found emotional support from peers and customers." Such socializing not only lowers mental stress but enriches vendors' lives by giving them a wider sense of community. Additionally, many vendors feel proud selling products that reflect what they like or their culture. V2-N said participating in car boot sales made him feel more satisfied as he could mix his interests and skills into his products. This sense of personal success leads to higher life satisfaction. Positive customer feedback also boosts vendors' self-worth, making their quality of life better. V5-W noted, "The market has been fulfilling and satisfying; it has allowed me to find another possibility in my life, and I have become more confident in the process." This rise in confidence strengthens vendors' mental resilience, making it easier for them to handle future challenges.

#### **4.3 The Role of Social Capital in Car Boot Sales**

Car boot sales serve as a distinct example of the informal market economy, providing a unique platform for social interaction, community integration, and business development. Through participation in these markets, vendors build crucial social networks among themselves and with their customers. These networks, formed based on trust, reciprocity, and cooperation, offer not only economic benefits but also contribute to deeper social cohesion. As Putnam (2000) emphasizes, social capital, generated through trust, norms, and networks, facilitates coordinated action and enhances both economic and

social outcomes. In the context of car boot sales, interactions between vendors and buyers establish essential social bonds that foster collaboration, encourage collective action, and result in enhanced financial performance and community cohesion. Drawing on contemporary social capital theories, this section critically examines how the relationships developed within car boot sales influence vendors' business success and their integration into local communities.

One important aspect of social capital as seen in car boot sales is the way that social networks support each other and cooperation among vendors is encouraged. This can be connected to Burt's (2000) idea of bonding social capital, which talks about the importance of strong links inside closely connected groups. These relationships among them allow vendors to share things like resources, knowledge, and experience, which then boosts their ability as a group to deal with market ups and downs. For example, some interviews with people selling at the Shekou Sea World car boot market showed that working together among sellers was important to their economic success. Vendor V7-L said, "When I first began, pricing my items competitively was hard for me. But through advice and help from others, I figured out how to better price items and find products more effectively." This case shows social networks inside these markets store a lot of collective knowledge, allowing vendors to improve strategies and stay competitive and improve their operational efficiency. And trust is a major part that makes cooperation in these networks possible. Coleman (1988) said trust is a base of social capital that is built on mutual help and shared values. In the car boot sales scenario, trust between vendors comes from repeated interactions and exchanging favours. Vendors often work together on sourcing products, offering advice on how to improve products, and sharing supply channels. For example, a vintage clothing seller, V15-H, mentioned, "Sometimes I work with neighbouring stalls to bulk order vintage clothes from wholesalers. Doing so not only cuts costs but also builds comradeship. I value the mutual trust we have." This cooperation not only reduces operating costs but also strengthens friendly ties between vendors, which makes the social network sturdier. Bourdieu (1986) said such interactions grow vendors' economic and social capital, making their position better within the informal market structure.

Social capital not only enhances vendor cooperation but also influences vendor-customer relationships. The theory of social capital suggests trust and

mutual help are essential for building customer loyalty and keeping long-term economic transactions going. Researchers like Putnam (2000) and Granovetter (1973) mentioned interpersonal trust is critical to setting up ongoing economic exchanges. Some vendors in interviews pointed out that building relationships with customers is key to their success. For instance, V12-Z, a handmade jewellery seller, shared, “Over time, I created a core group of repeat customers who believe in my work's quality and tell others about it. They're not just buying jewellery, they are investing in our relationship.” This shows how emotional connections built on trust and mutual respect lead to repeat business and customer loyalty, which are crucial for a vendor's survival in the informal market. Additionally, strong relationships between vendors and customers lead to positive word-of-mouth, which raises market visibility and grows a vendor's customer base. Using social media smartly also boosts this effect. For example, V7-L, who sells trendy toys, noted, “I use short video platforms along with offline activities, often updating my products. Many fans interact with me online, and some even travel from other places to meet me.” This approach not only helps keep customers but also boosts their satisfaction and loyalty.

The impact of social connections within car boot sales extends beyond vendors to enhance community integration. As said by Adler and Kwon (2002), Networks between people act as bridges, connecting individuals to new opportunities and broader networks. Within car boot sales, interactions between vendors and community members foster a sense of belonging. Vendors often act as cultural intermediaries, with their stalls serving as spaces for conversation and exchange. For example, vendor V11-S at Shenzhen Tea Expo stated, “This market feels like my second house. Customers are my close ones, through this market, like I belong to the community in ways unexpected.” This level of community mixing brings not only economic profits to vendors, having steady customers but also encourages a stronger sense of social joining and belonging, fundamentals to building social capital. In this sense, the relationships formed in these informal markets help vendors strengthen their social position in the community while also boosting their economic resilience.

Another sign of social capital within car boot sales is its role in pushing group actions. As Portes (1998) mentions, group actions helped by strong social networks can boost economic results. Vendors collaborate often to organize combined sales events, plan promotions together, and negotiate better market terms jointly. For example, vendors at Jinxiu Zhonghua Park Market



collaborated on a joint promotion campaign, raising customer movement and improving overall sales. This example shows the importance of group action in boosting both personal and group successes in informal markets. Moreover, the shift from solo stands to creating or joining teams marks a change from personal fulfilment to group belonging. Vendors not only feel a belonging (as V6-L noted, “It feels like a large family where everyone is helpful”) but also align their gains with the team's success. Therefore, group unity boosts both personal satisfaction and collective economic outcomes.

In conclusion, the social connections and linkages found in Shenzhen's car boot sales do multifarious things to shape how vendors succeed in their ventures and how they fit in locally. These connections help with giving emotional and instrumental aid, fostering trust and working together, and pushing collective actions that all add to better economic results and a stronger community feel. When social capital theory is applied, it's apparent that both bonding and bridging social capital work together in these settings, making a self-perpetuating system where informal economy activities and social fitting in help each other. In future, looking into how digital platforms mix with usual in-person market interactions can open up new paths for growing social capital in the informal economy would be beneficial.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Overview of the current study**

This study aimed to give insights into how car boot sales in Shenzhen affect vendor motivations, social lives and social links. Through qualitative methods like detailed interviews and case studies, the study brings out the main motivations of vendors to join these informal markets, usually economic needs, entrepreneurial spirits, and drives of social interactions. It further looks at how these sales affect the economic stability, social ties, and mental well-being of vendors, exploring also how social connections among vendors and between them and customers help their business success and community joining. Results align with past studies confirming the key roles of economic drives and social networks in informal settings (Smith, 1987; Greene & Storey, 2010; Burt, 2000). It also shows specific ways social networks impact vendor business outcomes and community fitting, providing a detailed analysis not fully explored before. Thus, this study not only supports existing theories, but also gives new

views for understanding how exactly social capital works. Discussion next will deeply explore how these findings fit past works and talk about study limitations and future research paths.

## **5.2 Interpretation of the findings and their linkages**

The results of this study show that economic motivation is the main driver of car boot sales, a finding that is consistent with Smith's (1987) and Greene & Storey's (2010) analyses of the informal market in terms of livelihood security and economic opportunities. Smith (1987) notes that informal economic activities are particularly important for households that are dependent on a single source of income. Especially in times of economic uncertainty, these activities provide a critical financial buffer for households. Car boot sales, as a low barrier to market entry, are a tangible manifestation of this economic supplementation purpose. Greene & Storey (2010) further emphasise that small-scale entrepreneurial activities, especially those operating in the informal economy, play an important economic buffer role in times of financial turbulence. This is in line with the findings of this study, demonstrating the dominance of economic motives in the informal market, particularly in a low-cost form of market such as car boot sales, which further validates Bourdieu's (1986) theory on economic capital. Specifically, Bourdieu (1986) suggests that the informal market, by avoiding fixed rents, utility bills, and complex regulatory requirements, allows participants to accumulate wealth at a lower cost. In the case of V13-L, for example, car boot sales serve as a low-risk market testing ground, demonstrating how informal markets can provide more economic flexibility and entrepreneurial opportunities than formal markets. Such a market form not only supports low-cost entrepreneurship, but also reduces the economic pressures found in traditional markets and allows entrepreneurs to test market demand at lower risk, thus validating the theory of economic capital. The results of this study are consistent with those of Castells and Portes (1989). Castells and Portes (1989) emphasised the adaptability of informal markets, suggesting that such markets can swiftly adapt to economic changes and offer opportunities to individuals who struggle to access formal market opportunities.

This study demonstrates that this flexibility distinguishes car boot sales from traditional retail environments, which often have rigid structures. Consequently, vendors capitalise on emerging consumer trends and gain resilience against broader economic fluctuations. The iterative refinement of business strategies based on consumer feedback and direct experience further illustrates how

participation in car boot sales contributes not only to immediate income generation but also to sustainable entrepreneurial growth, aligning with Castells and Portes (1989). Nevertheless, this study reveals several discrepancies with existing literature. For instance, Portes and Haller (2005) argue that informal markets generally face higher business risks, particularly in contexts characterised by economic instability and regulatory deficiencies. In contrast, this study finds that car boot vending presents lower risks, possibly due to geographical differences in the sample. While Portes and Haller (2005) examine regions with economic turmoil and inadequate laws, our study focuses on Shenzhen, a relatively stable region with supportive informal employment policies. Consequently, geographical differences might account for lower actual business risks compared to those described by Portes and Haller (2005). These discrepancies suggest avenues for future cross-cultural and cross-regional research to better understand the complexities and diversity of informal markets.

Furthermore, in this study, I found that car boot sales had a profound impact on the social livelihoods of the vendors, not only in terms of a significant increase in financial gains, but also in terms of positive improvements in psychological well-being and quality of life, which is consistent with Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory, which posits that autonomy, competence, and a sense of belonging are the core elements of psychological well-being. Specifically, the sale enabled the vendors to regain autonomy over their work organisation, thereby reducing occupational stress and increasing psychological resilience. Secondly, the improved economy has not only raised the vendors' material standard of living, but also enhanced their sense of financial security and stability in life, enabling them to manage their finances flexibly, meet their basic needs and plan for the future. In addition, through interactions with other vendors and customers, vendors have developed diverse social networks, and such interactions not only provide emotional support but also reduce the psychological burden of social isolation. Finally, vendors were able to achieve self-expression and personal fulfilment through the sale of personalised products, which significantly increased life satisfaction. Overall, this study not only validates the multidimensional impact of car boot sales in the informal market, but also demonstrates its unique contribution in terms of a sense of autonomy, economic independence, social engagement, and self-identity. Car boot sales make a significant contribution to the overall well-being of vendors through a combination of economic empowerment, social integration, and personal fulfilment.

The study's findings further underscore the pivotal role of social capital in facilitating cooperation and mutual support among vendors. Social networks, as a fundamental aspect of social capital, are instrumental in risk-sharing (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000), driving economic growth, enabling resource sharing, and providing access to employment opportunities (Granovetter, 1973; Coleman, 1988). In relational societies such as China, social connections are particularly vital for providing essential support (Yang, 1994). Car boot sales, as an emerging business model, provide vendors with opportunities to broaden their social networks through interactions with both consumers and peers. On one hand, vendors engage directly with consumers, expanding their customer base and acquiring insights into market demand. On the other hand, interactions with fellow vendors facilitate cross-disciplinary networking and collaborative opportunities. Moreover, my research corroborates the findings of Adler and Kwon (2002), which examine how social capital enhances organisational adaptability in volatile environments through heightened trust and inter-organisational cooperation. Within the realm of car boot sales, the trust and collaborative efforts among vendors, exemplified by shared purchasing strategies, reflect this adaptability. This finding not only supports Adler and Kwon's theories but also indicates that, within informal markets, social capital can mitigate costs and boost market competitiveness by fostering cooperation.

Car boot sales function as a dynamic link between vendors and consumers, as well as a significant platform for both cooperation and communication among vendors. Regardless of whether vendors are driven by social intentions or business expansion goals, car boot sales enable them to consistently broaden their social networks. These connections positively impact vendors' professional trajectories, personal lives, and the development of their future industry prospects. Consequently, social relationships contribute to augmented financial capital, both through direct earnings from car boot sales and through leveraging social networks, as posited by Putnam (2000).

### **5.3 Theoretical contributions and practical implications**

By applying Granovetter's (1973) theory of weak ties to the car boot market, it was found that weak ties are more important in informal markets than in traditional formal markets. These weak ties help suppliers expand their access to resources, identify market trends and business opportunities, and enhance

their competitiveness in an environment of economic uncertainty. This contrasts with findings in stable environments and reveals the dynamic and multilevel role of weak ties in informal markets. Kawachi and Berkman (2003) emphasised the protective role of social capital for individual health in health research but did not delve deeper into its application in economic markets. The present study, on the other hand, fills this research gap by demonstrating how social capital promotes economic stability and mental health in informal markets. I find that social capital not only facilitates economic transactions, but also enhances suppliers' psychological resilience and life satisfaction through social ties, extending the scope of its impact. Furthermore, while Field (2003) and Huggins et al. (2012) point out that resource allocation of social capital favours privileged groups, the study finds that the role of social capital in the car boot market is not limited to specific groups. Suppliers gain access to diverse resources and opportunities through extensive social networks, leading to wider economic and social integration in the informal market. This finding further suggests that the function of social capital in informal markets is more complex and multidimensional. In summary, by revealing the key role of social networks in the car boot market, this paper extends the scope of the application of social capital theory and provides new perspectives for the economic and social study of informal markets.

This study fills a key gap in the current literature by examining car boot sales in China, an area that is under-explored compared to studies that have been conducted in Western contexts (particularly the UK). The majority of existing informal market research has focused on the Western context, examining aspects such as second-hand goods, charitable trading and environmental sustainability, often from a consumer behavioural perspective. This study shows that the Chinese car boot market exhibits different characteristics compared to Western car boot markets, such as increased commercialisation, greater product diversity and diverse community interaction dynamics. These findings emphasise that car boot sales are not universally homogeneous but are influenced by the local socio-cultural and economic context. By extending the theoretical framework to encompass non-Western contexts, this study enriches the existing discourse by informing policymakers and practitioners about the specific characteristics and needs of informal markets in different settings.

In addition to addressing geographical disparities, this study provides valuable

insights into the micro-dynamics of the informal economy, particularly in the niche market of car boot sales. Previous research on informal employment has tended to generalise findings to broad categories, ignoring the unique characteristics of niche markets. This study addresses this limitation by examining in detail how car boot sales affect vendors' income stability, job security and access to social services. The study shows that vendors in the car boot market benefit from greater financial security and flexibility, which contrasts with the more rigid structure typically associated with traditional informal employment. By focusing on these micro-level dynamics, the study provides a more nuanced perspective on how niche markets function in the broader informal economy.

From a practical perspective, the study has important implications for suppliers, marketplace organisers and policymakers. For suppliers, the findings highlight the critical role of building strong social networks and utilising traditional and digital tools to improve market success. By building strong relationships within local communities and effectively utilising online social platforms to reach a wider audience, suppliers can increase their market presence and competitiveness. This approach not only helps attract and retain customers, but also helps adapt to changing market dynamics and consumer preferences. For market organisers and policymakers, this study highlights the importance of developing policies and infrastructure to facilitate vendors to connect and interact with customers in multiple ways. These may include economic incentives for vendors, such as tax breaks, market fee subsidies or microcredits, as well as the creation of spaces where vendors can network and collaborate effectively. In addition, the study provides valuable insights into urban development and community planning. As informal markets such as car boot sales become increasingly integrated into the urban environment, planners should consider how these markets can contribute to community cohesion and local economic development. Urban planners can create more inclusive and vibrant public spaces that meet diverse needs and contribute to a thriving local economy. For example, linking these markets to local festivals, night markets or community events. Such integration not only increases foot traffic and creates synergistic benefits for vendors, but also promotes greater community engagement and cultural expression. In conclusion, the practical implications of this study are that it has the potential to guide the development of supportive policies and infrastructures that are beneficial to vendors, market organisers and policymakers, creating a supportive environment for informal markets and

maximising the economic and social benefits of these market models.

## **5.4 Research Limitations**

It is necessary to acknowledge the limitations of this study, which impact both the generalizability and robustness of the findings. This study encountered several significant limitations that must be considered when interpreting the results. Firstly, the study utilized snowball sampling, a method that can introduce selection bias. Since this method relies on initial participants to refer others, it may result in a sample that is not entirely representative of the broader population of informal market vendors. Consequently, the findings may not fully capture the diverse experiences and perspectives within the informal sector, affecting the generalizability of the results.

Furthermore, the study's geographical focus on Shenzhen, a city with unique regulatory environments and supportive policies for informal markets, introduces another limitation. This localized focus means that the findings may not apply to other cities with different regulatory frameworks or market conditions. Therefore, while the results offer valuable insights into Shenzhen's informal market, caution is needed when applying these conclusions to other regions with different contexts.

In addition, the qualitative nature of this research, while providing in-depth insights into the social dynamics of informal markets, lacks quantitative measures of economic impact. The absence of data on vendor income and market performance limits the ability to assess the full economic implications of informal market activities. Integrating quantitative methods with qualitative insights in future research could address this gap and offer a more comprehensive understanding of the economic dimensions of informal markets.

Overall, these limitations underscore areas for improvement and refinement in future research. Despite these constraints, the study provides valuable insights into the informal market dynamics in Shenzhen and lays a foundation for further exploration and methodological development.

## **5.5 Future Research Directions**

To enhance our understanding of informal markets beyond the boot sale context, several key areas require further exploration. Regarding geographical scope, although this study focuses on Shenzhen, exploring car boot sales markets in

cities with varying regulatory environments is also crucial. Expanding the research sample geographically in future studies could allow for a comparison of motivations and behavioural differences across regions. Furthermore, future research could broaden the study to include various informal market types, such as street vendors, flea markets, and online platforms, assessing if the social capital observed in Shenzhen impacts economic success and social well-being in different market environments or is dependent on market type or location. These comparative analyses not only validate the generalizability of previous findings but also offer deeper insights into informal market operations under diverse conditions.

Additionally, this study focuses on micro-level cases, such as individual traders in car boot bazaars, and does not address larger-scale market organizers or government agencies. This narrow focus limits insights into how broader organizational structures and policy frameworks impact the informal market sector. Addressing this issue requires future research to analyze the role and impact of market organizers and government agencies more comprehensively. Examining the contributions of these entities to the planning, regulation, and support of informal markets will reveal broader systemic factors influencing vendor experiences and market dynamics. This expanded perspective will offer a more comprehensive understanding of the informal market landscape and enhance insights into interactions between grassroots vendors and higher-level market management and policymaking processes.

Lastly, future studies could employ a mixed-methods approach for cross-validation. Quantitative data from structured surveys or statistical analyses can reveal trends, patterns, and correlations in informal markets, including supplier demographics, transaction volumes, or market growth rates. Qualitative data from in-depth interviews, focus groups, or participant observation can enrich findings by exploring root causes, personal narratives, and unexpected insights not captured by numerical data alone. Overall, addressing these research directions can underscore the contribution of informal markets to urban development and community cohesion, assisting urban planners and policymakers in integrating informal markets into broader urban planning strategies and recommending more inclusive approaches.



## 6. Conclusion

This study focuses on answering three core research questions: vendors' motivations for engaging in car boot sales, the multifaceted impacts of these engagements on vendors' social livelihoods and well-being, and the impacts of social capital in the market on entrepreneurial outcomes and community cohesion among vendors.

The results of this study suggest that vendors are driven by multiple motivations when choosing to participate in car boot sales. Economic need is the most important of these factors. In the context of the epidemic, many suppliers wanted to use this low-cost, low-threshold new market opportunity to expand their previously single revenue stream, increase their economic resilience, and protect against uncertain external factors. In addition, car boot sales provide a low-risk platform for aspiring practitioners to test their business ideas and learn about the business market. Social engagement is also an important factor, with vendors valuing the opportunity to interact with participants from diverse backgrounds within the market and integrate into the community environment. The study also found that vendors' reasons for participating in the car boot market were diverse and not just driven by a sole factor among them. The car boot market, in turn, had a combined impact on the social livelihoods of the vendors. In addition to economic gains, this study summarises positive changes concerning social interactions, mental health and life satisfaction. A unique feature of this paper is the in-depth exploration of the role of social networks and relationships in the market. Social capital can have a broader impact within this scene than traditional economic and cultural capital. Social networks among suppliers facilitate the exchange of product and market information and can also better help them to work together in solidarity to collectively address new challenges faced within the market. Interactions between suppliers and buyers can help maintain long-term connections with customers, thus favouring sustainable long-term benefits.

This study extends existing theories of the informal economy and social capital by emphasising the intersection of economic, social and personal factors in the context of car boot sales. The strength of this study is the introduction of a new perspective that expands the understanding of the motivations and impacts of car boot sales at the micro level. The study highlights the fact that social capital (including trust, cooperation and networks) is no longer an added value to

economic transactions, but can integrate economic and cultural capital and play an equally important role in the context of informal employment. However, there are some limitations to this study. For example, there may have been a bias in sample selection and a failure to elaborate on the differences in these markets between regions. Future research could address these angles in depth. This study has both theoretical and practical value, from which policymakers can recognise the importance of nurturing social networks and creating an environment where trust and cooperation can flourish. It can also help them to adopt initiatives that promote the development of social capital, such as market regulations that encourage practitioners to work together or emerging models of community-based employment that promote the prosperity and diversity of informal markets such as car boot sales.

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## Appendix

### Interview outline

1. When did you first get in touch with the car boot market?
2. Is it as a main business or a side business?
3. What is the main business?
4. What is the reason for giving up the original industry and coming out to set up stalls?
5. What is the motivation for setting up a stall after daily work?
6. Conversion path: How was the process of entering the boot market industry and what were the opportunities?
7. Did you encounter any difficulties in the process of entering the industry?
8. How to choose the products?
9. How is the process of setting up a stall? What time do you start to prepare, what time do you close the stall, where do you set up the stall, and how often do you set up the stall?
10. Is there any difference between a personal stall and a market?
11. Will you join a fleet in the market and how do you choose a fleet?
12. Will you co-operate with other car owners in the market?
13. Is there any co-operation mechanism in the industry? For example, fleet, business circle activities?
14. Have you made use of new media and the Internet and so on for publicity?
15. Have you been influenced by any internal or external influences in the process (peer competition, government policy, internet)?
16. What changes have you experienced? Are there any improvements in equipment behaviour, what is the impact on the main business, what are the changes in the products sold, changes in the frequency and location of the stalls, etc.?
17. How will your participation in the car boot market affect you personally? For example, in terms of attitude towards life.
18. Will you communicate and interact with other vendors or customers in the market? Do you help each other?
20. Do you feel that the social and relationship networks within your market have had any impact on you?