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Clerics of cool: legitimacy exchange between asymmetrically powerful actors in a volatile consumption field

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ABSTRACT

Research has regularly addressed the disparities in power between consumers and more powerful market actors and the resultant market developments that emerge either through acts of resistance or the reproduction and consolidation of existing power structures. However, previous literature has primarily foregrounded dissatisfied consumers who are openly opposed to the aspirations of powerful actors. Through an inductive study of the sneaker subculture, we identify a previously overlooked category of consumer; a consumer with high field-dependent cultural capital who is dissatisfied with developments within their particular consumption field but who is generally unantagonistic towards powerful actors and willing to engage in an exchange of legitimacy that benefits all parties. We dub these actors "consumer Clerics." Through an institutional theory lens, we elaborate on the legitimacy exchange between powerful actors, consumers, and disruptive entrants, explore the dynamics of these relationships, and describe the nature of consumer Clerics' consumption field participation.

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Introduction

Markets evolve and adapt to changing circumstances over time. The accepted meanings, values, assumptions, and practices of a particular market or consumption context do not emerge ex nihilo, but are the result of the myriad actions and interactions of numerous people and organizations participating in said market or context. Under the broad term of "market dynamics," marketing scholars are increasingly turning to institutional theory in an effort to better understand the processes and practices involved in these evolutions (see Chaney, Ben Slimane, and Humphreys 2016; Ghaffari, Jafari, and Sandıkcı 2019; Giesler and Fischer 2017). The disparities in power between actors in markets is well-recognized, with streams within the literature describing both how these power relations manifest through the institutional work conducted by "powerful" actors (e.g. marketers, legislators, financiers, the media) (Ghaffari, Jafari, and Sandıkcı 2019) and how these are resisted by less powerful actors, be this though recalcitrant protest or constructive collaboration (e.g. Dolbec and Fischer 2015; Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli 2015; Giesler 2008, 2012; Kjeldgaard et al. 2017; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007; Weijo, Martin, and Arnould 2018). Within this literature, challenges to power asymmetries are chiefly characterized as being instigated by either large numbers of loosely-organized consumers, or by smaller numbers of highly-motivated consumer activists. The former group are most often understood

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to be more casual participants unassumingly effecting change though overwhelming numbers, while the latter are generally participants with higher involvement (e.g. influencers, taste-makers, mavens, or other participants) and in possession of a great deal of cultural, if not pecuniary, capital. However, there is a category of consumer that does not fit neatly into either of these groups. These are high-involvement participants with high field-dependent cultural capital who are dissatisfied or disenchanted with their changing consumption context but who are nevertheless not inclined to actively and antagonistically resist it. What then, compels these participants to continue and adapt their active participation in organizational fields which seem increasingly at odds with their values and practices? In this paper, we seek to shed light on this intriguing category of consumer through addressing the following two research questions:

(1) How do high-involvement, high cultural capital participants in a consumption field adapt their participation in response to perceived disagreeable or seemingly antithetical developments within said field?
(2) Why do these actors continue to participate in these consumption fields in a non-antagonistic fashion?

In the sections that follow, we first review prior literature on market dynamics relevant to our consumer-driven approach and delineate a conceptualization of the "power" that is being redistributed, appropriated, and gelded within the consumption field in question. Through reference to our research context, we next exemplify selected concepts from the institutional theory toolkit that are particularly relevant to our purposes and describe our methodology. Finally, we present our findings and discuss their implications.

Literature review: does the consumer have power in the market?

Weber (1978) defined power as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests" (53). The probabilistic nature of this definition describes power dynamics (i.e. the ability to carry out one's will) within a social relationship as not being subject solely to the actions of the powerful, but also involving less powerful actors altering their behavior to challenge or concede to powerful actors. The means by which market actors mold public perception and accede to the public's demands can, rather uncontroversially, be regarded as the central narrative of marketing and marketing scholarship. Indeed, numerous and diverse studies demonstrate that the market operates as a domain where power is both reproduced and contested (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Askegaard, Arnould, and Kjeldgaard 2005; Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003; Fischer, Otnes, and Tuncay 2007; Holt 1997, 1998; Kates 2002; Kozinets 2002; Sandıkcı and Ger 2010; Thompson 2004; Üstüner 2007). To frankly acknowledge coercion and the manufacture of compulsion is, of course, vulgar as well uncongenial to the designs of said coercion. As such, from its earliest days the founding fathers of public relations have couched their manipulative schemes in the language of emancipation:

> And cannot the man who has manipulated his public opinion and won it to his side misuse it for his own purpose? Possibly he can. There are Ku Klux Klans, there are Mussolinis, there are tyrannies of every sort; but a public that learns more and more how to express itself will learn more and more how to overthrow tyranny of every sort. So that every man who teaches the public how to ask for what it wants is at the same time teaching the public how to safeguard itself against his own possible tyrannous aggressiveness. (Bernays 1928)

This tendency has continued to the present day, with the adept manipulation and satiation of consumption often being regarded as the solution to all manner of society's ills. In the 1980s, Pierre Bourdieu synthesized a number of theoretical traditions and proposed a model of social organization centered around the accumulation of various forms of capital: he termed these economic, cultural, and social capital and proposed that the employment of these resources served competition

for status, or "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu 1984). Within the social sciences, discussion of these various forms of capital would go on to serve as a convenient shibboleth with which to discuss the fluctuating fortunes of all manner of actors (Holt 1998). In Bourdieu's formulation, cultural capital was cultivated within the social milieu of (generally upper middle and upper class) cultural elites and was closely associated with high levels of formal education and occupations involving symbolic reproduction. However, as Arsel and Thompson (2011) write:

> This Bourdieuian conceptualization stands at theoretical odds with an expanding number of studies that argue that consumer culture is constituted by a plenitude of consumption-oriented subcultures or communities, each characterized by distinctive value systems, normative discourses, modes of practice, and status systems. (793)

As such, terminology has entered the academic discourse that foregrounds the field-specific nature of certain forms of cultural capital while not trivializing them. Contemporary studies also emphasize that field-dependent cultural capital is often subject to influence from without as well as within the field in which it has value. In Arsel and Thompson's (2011) study, consumers in the consumption field variously known as "indie" or "hipster" have seen their interests and knowledge reduced to a "bourgeois affectation" of "winking inauthenticity" (796) in the eyes of those not active in the field. It became a subculture that attracted particular ire from without its borders for its perceived pretensions, and mocking or satirical takes on the movement were how many people came to learn about indie. Ironically, these etic narratives would serve to recruit participants to the culture who believed it to be as superficial as the scathing commentators made it seem. The authors deftly articulate how high-involvement indie consumers engage in "demythologizing" practices (such as high levels of aesthetic discrimination and resisting stereotypical tropes of the field) that protect their cultural capital from devaluation from outside actors and new entrants. In this manner, the authors show how certain high-involvement consumers can leverage their cultural and aesthetic knowledge into the power to differentiate themselves, even if only on a personal level, from poseurs and the derogatory judgments of outsiders.

Consumers have also been shown achieving more than protecting their field-dependent cultural capital from depreciation at the hands of callously indifferent outsiders. Sandıkcı and Ger (2010), in a study on wearers of veils in Turkey, demonstrate how, through concerted effort, consumers have been able to address the stigma attached to an object and practice by the public. As the authors write, "adopting the veil is a choice that runs against the grain of consumer socialization" (16). These consumers engage in something more than an act of resistance against extant social mores and consumption practices, utilizing their practice of wearing a veil as a means to signal the "virtuous choices" they have made in their lives (30). Crucially, this rejection of one form of restriction (contemporary, secular stigma associated with the veil) and choice to accept another is viewed as a means to enact agency and pursue their own identity projects.

Rather than engage in overt acts of resistance and using consumption to signal deeper moral concerns, the *Fatshionistas* of Scaraboto and Fischer's 2012 study feel alienated from an organizational field in which they want to participate: namely, fashion consumption. And while they feel underserved and indeed discriminated against, their goal is not to overthrow the "elites" who are regarded as being the ultimate source of the prejudice they face. They do not even believe that "the organizational field of fashion as it is should be revolutionized" (1246). Rather, Fatshionistas engage in strategies that unantagonistically seek to work within the logics of the field. These efforts are ultimately lent power by the sheer numbers of people involved in social media-enabled coordinated action. As the authors write:

> Whereas consumers of [for example] organic foods resented and resisted the co-optation of their values by mainstream marketers, Fatshionistas actively seek and willingly accept opportunities to ally with mainstream fashion marketers. (1250)

As an example, one of these strategies is simply to appeal to the commercial institutional logic of "selling more stuff," and there is no real attempt to vilify their opponents.

Arvidsson and Caliandro's (2016) concept of "brand publics" adeptly describes the nature of a cohort of consumers who engage with brands in a more nominal, less idealistic way but who nevertheless form an organized media space operating through shared practices centered around particular mediation devices (such as hashtags). However, the infrequency with which brand publics engage with both the brand and one another is not amenable to the deliberative construction of common values. Rather, they lead to an assembly of "empty signifiers" that can nevertheless operate as aggregating devices that aid social movements by motivating the participation of a mass of otherwise disconnected individuals.

In our study, we utilize institutional theory as a means to understand the participation in a consumption field of a type of consumer previously overlooked by the literature. We contribute to the extant literature by analyzing this cohort of consumers in terms of how their field-dependent cultural capital grants them unusual power to enact their will in protecting practices that they value (and repurposing those they do not). Additionally, their nonantagonistic methods (both towards powerful actors and disruptive entrants) allow them to continue to exist in the field while enjoying a certain amount of deference.

Research setting

The consumer culture of seeking out rare and exclusive sneakers and utilizing them as a key component of identity and social status (as well as paying what are widely considered obnoxious prices for them) has existed since the late 1970s (Denny 2020), but has generally been considered by most people to be a somewhat esoteric and subcultural pursuit. However, this is becoming less and less the case, and "exclusive" and expensive sneakers are becoming ever more visible in day to day life; it is now far from unusual to see someone wearing Yeezys at the office or to see parents picking their kids up from school in Jordan 1s. Social media and online sales and trading platforms have been overwhelmingly responsible for breaking down extant barriers to entry relating to the acquisition of exclusive sneakers, particularly physical and geographical barriers; you no longer have to live close to the sneaker store and camp overnight in queues to be able to cop that new pair of kicks. It is now much easier to participate in the culture remotely, using the internet to develop and maintain the cultural knowledge and relationships that are necessary for identifying and acquiring desirable shoes. Sneaker culture is – like so many other consumer cultures – full of status games, and highly involved, long-term members now find their pursuit full of recent entrants from which they are inclined to try and distinguish themselves. Taking advantage of this new, more connected state of affairs, entrepreneurial entrants have also made use of social media and trading platforms to leverage sneaker reselling from side hustle to lucrative full-time occupation. The activities of these highly-organized resellers have now made it next to impossible for most consumers (and even well-informed participants) to purchase a single pair of exclusive sneakers for personal use at retail price through "official" channels (Deleon 2020; Woody 2024). Long-term and highly-involved participants are understandably less than enthused that the cultural knowledge that gave them an advantage when collecting sneakers has now largely been supplanted by simple questions of who can pay the most. Brands benefit enormously from the hype resulting from resellers making the shoes increasingly hard to get (Dolbec and Parmentier 2019), but now walk a fine line between tolerating these activities and policing the resale market so that "legitimate" sneakerheads – upon whom sneaker brands' authenticity relies (Denny 2020; Diaz 2018) – feel they have some chance of buying shoes for "reasonable" prices.

This research is concerned principally with the effects upon market dynamics of a particular subset of actors within the organizational field of sneaker consumption: that is, highly-involved participants concerned with preserving the extant tenets of the culture, who are yet largely unantagonistic towards emerging developments. However, as this research seeks to understand the interrelations of

various actors, it is apposite to briefly describe the roles and practices of the three particular actors within the organizational field in question which made up our study. These are: *high-involvement consumers, resellers,* and *brands*.

High-involvement consumers

Two terms abound when describing sneaker consumers: *sneakerhead* and *hypebeast*. As with most subcultural language, it is difficult to ascribe firm definitions to the terms, but for the purposes of this research we utilized the interpretations most readily described by our participants. But, beyond the table presented as part of the findings, we resisted the impulse to readily ascribe these monikers to our participants beyond what they themselves shared with us. Certain terms in sneaker culture can be judged as derogatory in the wrong context, and individuals can encompass the qualities of more than one title. It is not our intention to overrule the context and etically normalize nominal distinctions. However, in simple terms, Sneakerheads were generally viewed as more "authentic" and less mercenary participants in sneaker culture. Sneakerheads spend time acquiring cultural knowledge and are able to readily recall the history and cultural significance of particular models and colorways of sneakers. The shoes in their collections will hold deep personal significance to them, and while they might engage in trading activities and spend inordinate amounts of money on particular shoes, these practices are subordinate to other cultural considerations (Edler 2012). Conversely, hypebeasts are generally viewed as more superficial participants in sneaker culture, more concerned with acquiring and displaying the latest desirable releases on social media than building a substantial collection; hypebeasts will often hold on to a shoe only for as long as it takes to post an artistically-composed picture of them wearing it to their Instagram profile before selling the shoe on to fund their next purchase. Hypebeasts are also seen as ascribing more importance to the secondary market value of sneakers as a signification of prestige than sneakerheads. During our conversations with participants, older, more experienced actors were often regarded as sneakerheads, and younger ones as hypebeasts. It is important to emphasize however, that while the ideologies of these actors might be at odds, both are widely regarded as being highly-involved in the culture.

Resellers

This seemingly innocuous word has become a loaded term in sneaker culture, particularly in light of the recent emergence of online platforms such as StockX and GOAT that simplify sneaker trading. Reselling shoes for profit has long been a part of sneaker consumption, but initially this took the form of inner-city youth with little financial means but geographic and temporal access to retailers buying a second pair to sell to actors with less access. They would then use the profit from the sale to offset the cost of the shoes they kept as well as fund future purchases. Online retailing has exponentially increased the number of people attempting to pick up each new desirable release through decreasing the necessity of geographic proximity to sneaker stores and the need to physically spend time waiting in lines. To the chagrin of many long-term sneakerheads, this has led to huge increases in secondary market prices and incentivized more entrepreneurially-minded actors to enter this market. Initially, online trading was conducted on unspecialized auction sites such as eBay, and barriers to entry were somewhat higher than they are now. eBay resellers relied on good reputations to conduct business at any significant scale and dealing in fake or dishonestly described shoes would negatively affect their business – even disingenuous reviews could harm them. However, in 2015 the StockX platform emerged with the explicit intention of rationalizing the sneaker resale market and establishing a "fairer" and more transparent way of determining the monetary value of particular shoes (Luber 2015; Noskova 2016). Traders' and consumers' identities are never shared during a StockX transaction, rather "offers" and "bids" are automatically matched up and StockX themselves police the market, requiring that all shoes traded pass through one of

their facilities to be physically authenticated by a highly-knowledgeable human employee. Financial penalties and bans are levied against those caught transgressing, and these policies have been effective in deterring dishonest traders. Other sneaker trading platforms have since replicated StockX's practices in this regard. However, with the platforms now having taken on the burden of responsibility for reputation management, ever more entrants have found it easier to access the sneaker resale market due to not having to expend time and effort becoming a trusted participant in the culture. Reselling activities have become increasingly professionalized, and more actors are now able to expend effort on cornering releases though disreputable means. These include practices such as gaming online raffles with bots, or outright bribing retailers to release huge amounts of stock to them ahead of a release date through a practice known as "backdooring." In a sign of the changing nature of sneaker culture, backdooring was initially a highly illegitimate practice which was understood to happen, but rare and frowned upon. In the present day, cooperative groups with membership fees now openly exist to facilitate the practice, and one can even find "how to backdoor" videos on YouTube.

Brands

Sneaker culture (that is, sneaker consumption beyond more utilitarian concerns) is overwhelmingly dominated by three brands: Nike, Air Jordan, and Adidas. While Air Jordan is a subsidiary of Nike, it operates largely independently of its parent corporation with its own designers, corporate structure, and marketing and is regarded as "accretive" rather than "cannibalizing" sales that would otherwise have gone to Nike (Bain 2019). Underlining Air Jordan's importance to the sneaker market, its yearly revenues generally surpass that of third place player Adidas and are only exceeded by Nike (Bain 2017). Other brands considered relevant to sneakerhead culture include Puma, Reebok, Vans, New Balance, Converse, ASICS, Saucony, Salomon, and Karhu. While the sales of these shoes are dwarfed by the big three players, the underdog brands regularly emulate the strategies of Nike, Air Jordan, and Adidas, releasing limited special editions and collaborations that are desirable for sneakerheads (as evidenced by the inflated resale prices they can attain on the secondary market).

Overview of key theoretical concepts

Recently, studies that seek to elucidate the ways in which the actions and interactions of consumers and other actors, rather than solely marketers, bring about changes to a market have made use of institutional theory as a lens through which to better understand the complex interactions of numerous actors in a particular environment of consumption, or *organizational field*.

While initially arising as a means by which to examine the ecosystems of more conventional organizations (e.g. firms, governmental departments, universities), institutional theory has proved well-suited to the investigation of the networks of actors present in modern consumption contexts; the increasing prevalence of two-way interaction facilitated by contemporary social media has profoundly altered the erstwhile producer/consumer power relationship, and organizational fields of consumption are becoming ever more dynamic.

> From a rather simple theory – that organizational forms, practices, categories, and so on become reified or "institutionalized" beyond their functional utility, becoming infused with particular meanings that may not have been there, or intended, initially – institutional theory has blossomed into an intricate landscape of (mostly) complementary theoretical ideas. (Munir 2015, 90)

Institutional theory encompasses a number of major concepts and theoretical assumptions, and three of these key concepts are of particular use to us in addressing the research questions of this study. These are: *Institutional logics*, *institutional work*, and *legitimacy*.

Institutional logics refers to the content and, more importantly, the *meanings* of institutions. Institutional logics are "socially constructed and historically patterned assumptions, values, and

beliefs by which people in particular contexts provide meaning both to daily activities and to their life projects and experiences" (Dolbec and Fischer 2015, 1449). The institutional environment is heterogeneous and made up of multiple, potentially conflicting institutional demands (Friedland and Alford 1991).

Institutional work is a term coined by Lawrence and colleagues (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2009) to describe the actions and practices of actors in manifesting, maintaining, and changing or disrupting the institutions of an organizational field. The concept of institutional work highlights the recursive relationship between institutions and actions; that is, the manner and degree to which institutions mediate the actions of actors in an organizational field and how these actions can alter the nature of institutions.

Legitimacy has been a central concept within institutional theory since the late 1970s. Seminal institutional theorists such as Meyer and Rowan (1977) and Scott (2001) characterize legitimacy as an ethereal quality bestowed on actors as a result of observing and acquiescing to (or, at least, *appearing* to) the "myths of modern society" (Norbäck and Wedlin 2020, 221). Legitimacy is a somewhat contradictory concept, bestowing dominance on entities and actors in a field as long as this dominance is not recognized as such. Legitimacy is central to sneaker consumption and culture, encompassing qualities including functionality and practical utility, technical prowess and innovation, success, and cultural alignment. In layman's terms, legitimacy in sneaker culture is perhaps best understood through the fundamental contradiction of cool; if you're trying to be cool, then you aren't (Brown 2021; Potter and Heath 2004). This conceit applies as much to organizations as it does to participants, and recent developments in sneaker consumption have not just complicated the roles of more "traditionally legitimate" actors (i.e. sneakerheads, brands, retailers), but also given rise to newly legitimate actors in the form of entrepreneurial and more "professionalized" resellers who sell desirable sneakers on the secondary market at significant scale.

Coolness is a particular manifestation of legitimacy in the sneaker field and is a key element both for sneaker consumers themselves and for the brands catering to these consumers. Following Warren and Campbell (2014, 544) "coolness is a subjective and dynamic, socially constructed positive trait attributed to cultural objects (people, brands, products, trends, etc.) inferred to be appropriately autonomous." These dynamics of coolness clearly resonate in sneaker culture. What is legitimately considered cool is bound to a specific time and place, as well as to a particular social setting (Brown 2021). One of the key aspects of coolness is its ephemerality; as soon as a consensus agreement of what is cool is uttered, it evaporates. Coolness thus always shifts, and those that chase after it are never cool, as coolness has to be disinterested (Belk, Tian, and Paavola 2010) and "appropriately autonomous," (Warren and Campbell 2014, 544): you cannot be cool in the same way as everybody else.

Methodological approach

In line with other research into market dynamics (Dolbec and Fischer 2015; Ghaffari, Jafari, and Sandıkcı 2019; Giesler and Thompson 2016; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013), we adopted a qualitative, ethnographic approach to the collection and analysis of multiple sources of data. This allowed us to observe social and cultural phenomena, as well as shared meaning systems, through lived experience and as part of a cultural context (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). Between 2015 and 2019, the first author engaged in the culture by patronizing boutique sneaker stores in Sweden, Finland, Denmark, the UK, and Canada, attending events in Stockholm, Sweden, engaging in secondary market trading activities, and joining sneaker community social media groups.

During data collection, we engaged in ethnographic participant observation of the sneakerhead subculture in both its online and real world contexts. Real-world interactions were recorded with field notes and photographs. Over the course of the research, we conducted a total of twenty in-depth recorded interviews with participants ranging from forty-five minutes to two hours in length. These data are summarized in Table 1 (in which we also note which participants we consider to

Table 1. List of participants.

Name	Age	Occupation	Role	Attributes of a Cleric?
Aaron	36	IT	Sneakerhead	No
Ahmad	39	IT	Sneakerhead	Yes
Antrel	49	Sneaker Boutique Owner	Sneakerhead	Yes
Chase	47	Brand/outdoor Photographer	Sneakerhead	Yes
Chris	33	Dance Teacher	Sneakerhead	No
Clayton	36	Political party staffer	Sneakerhead	No
Corey	24	Student	Sneakerhead	Yes
David	35	Sneaker Retail	Sneakerhead	Yes
Eli	28	IT	Hypebeast/Reseller	No
Hakeem	28	Journalist	Sneakerhead	Yes
Henry	41	Investor	Sneakerhead	Yes
Jake	41	Programmer	Sneakerhead	Yes
Jason	22	Student	Sneakerhead	Yes
Justin	33	Reseller	Reseller	No
Kareem	37	IT/Artist	Sneakerhead	Yes
Kenny	41	Local Government Administration	Sneakerhead	Yes
Kevin	38	IT	Sneakerhead	No
Linval	38	IT	Sneakerhead	Yes
Michael	31	Consignment Store Owner	Reseller/Sneakerhead	Yes
Victor	26	Sneaker Retail	Sneakerhead	Yes

have the attributes of Clerics). Sneaker culture is dominated by men, and the makeup of our participants reflects this. Efforts were made to engage with more female participants, but these did not manifest naturally. Indeed, the first author was treated with a good deal of suspicion by participants, both men and women, until quite late in the research process. As such, attempting to "compel" female participants to take part felt contrived. To paraphrase one female researcher into "aficionadas" in sneaker culture, women are not just underrepresented, but their participation is often an act of feminist resistance (Lindsay-Prince 2013). The participation of women in the very masculine world of sneaker culture deserves more than an artificial attempt to over-represent them in the context of a broadly focused study.

All of these interviews were fully transcribed verbatim in order to facilitate ready analysis and comparison by the authors. These transcribed interviews amounted to 598 typed pages. The first author also engaged in numerous informal, unrecorded follow-up interviews with the participants as well as shorter ethnographic interviews in-situ at conventions and in boutique stores. Field notes taken over the course of the study amounted to approximately 100 typed pages and 380 photos and videos were taken.

In addition to ethnographic fieldwork, we engaged in netnographic activities (Kozinets 2010). The first author applied for membership and was accepted into five private Facebook groups recommended to him by a number of participants. These groups acted as community meeting places where members could share stories and trade sneakers. We also read over three hundred in-depth online articles (as well as countless shorter articles detailing new releases, rumors, etc.) and followed various content creators on YouTube. In reporting our findings, we use interview and netnographic excerpts to represent our data. All individuals have been given pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. All excerpts are from interviews unless otherwise noted.

In analyzing our data, we used a hermeneutic approach involving an iterative process of interpretation and reinterpretation that aims to develop a sense of the whole (Arnold and Fischer 1994; Thompson 1997). Throughout the research, we moved between different data sources as well as units and levels of analysis. Both authors continuously compared individual data interpretations to ensure analytical rigor.

Findings

Our research investigates how and why certain high involvement, high cultural capital participants in a consumption field adopt a non-antagonistic position in relation to more powerful and/or

disruptive actors who initiate, facilitate, and propagate what are regarded as antithetical practices. We choose to dub these high cultural capital, highly involved, non-antagonistic consumers "Clerics." In their attitudes, practices, roles, and how they are perceived by the wider field in which they are involved, we discern compelling parallels between our consumer Clerics and the those of the clergy of the predominant religions of contemporary, liberal, Western European democracies (the Church of England being a distinct example of our conceit). These clergy are overwhelmingly – if somewhat apathetically – regarded by the populations of these countries as vessels of moral authority and generally treated respectfully, if not reverentially (Hance 2021). While many people in the country in question will not actively participate in or even share the faith of their state religion, the vast majority will be familiar with its theology. These religious bodies are highly visible during a large number of state occasions and nationally-observed festivals, and their discourse, iconography, and ideologies are utilized to lend legitimacy and solemnity to all manner of wider practices (Prideaux 2020). However, their power remains "soft," and overt challenges to secular authority are rarely engaged in, nor brooked (Dinham 2008; Koch 2020). It is not our intention to treat these religious practitioners flippantly, rather, we find the juxtaposition of their sincerely held, systematized belief and pragmatic participation in wider society (Koch 2020) a compelling analogy.

Our analysis reveals consumer Clerics adapting to emerging, disagreeable institutional logics within the field in three principal ways. Firstly, our participants readily display an awareness of *conflicting logics* within the field – both extant and emerging – and show an ability to move past a need to resolve these juxtapositions. Secondly, the participants engage in *institutional work* that repurposes emerging disruptive practices for their own ends. These practices serve the participants by sustaining their enjoyment of the consumption field (both in navigating potential conflict and avoiding ostracism) and inviting continued engagement and a degree of deference from powerful actors and disruptive new entrants. This engagement and deference maintains and cultivates their field-dependent cultural capital. Finally, we find that these practices ultimately result in an asymmetric exchange of *legitimacy* between the actors in question.

Navigating conflicting institutional logics

The institutional logics of organizational fields, such as the consumption field in question, are understood to be heterogeneous, being made up of multiple, potentially conflicting institutional demands (Dunn and Jones 2010; Greenwood et al. 2011). The literature has acknowledged that navigating conflicting institutional logics, particularly when new logics arise that challenge existing logics, is "effortful, potentially difficult, and deserving of research attention in its own right" (Lounsbury and Boxenbaum 2013, 103). As our data show, emerging practices and logics in the field of sneaker collecting and trading are perceived by consumer Clerics as distasteful and even antithetical to their understanding of the field.

In order to understand the strategies used by Clerics to ameliorate the distasteful excesses of emerging practices and logics, it is first necessary to describe these. As related earlier, this disparity between established and emerging practices is illustrated by the dichotomy of "sneakerheads" and "hypebeasts." Sneakerheads laud knowledge and constancy, aspiring to the former through time spent in the culture, and demonstrating the latter by curating physical collections. Hypebeasts are understood to give primacy to deft responsiveness in expeditiously acquiring and displaying new releases and showing an aptitude for making financial profit. The practices of hypebeasts have been facilitated and promulgated by social media and online trading platforms. Social media platforms such as Instagram enable far-reaching and instantaneous signaling of one's new acquisition to one's peers; you no longer have to physically meet up with friends to show off your latest kicks. Also, social media's established model of constant engagement incentivizes hypebeasts to regularly update their feeds with newly released shoes that will attract the attention of their followers. This tendency to instantly want to reap the social benefits of one's latest desirable acquisition also runs against one of the core tenants of cool, that it has to be disinterested (Belk, Tian, and

Paavola 2010). From a coolness theory perspective, the sneakerheads' skepticism towards hypebeasts can be seen in this light.

Spending around $200 a week on new shoes is well beyond the means of most actors within the field, and so hypebeasts make use of online resale platforms and trading-oriented social media groups to sell on shoes once they have served their social media purpose. Kenny (sneakerhead) is a founder member of a private Facebook group to which the first author was granted membership. He related how this group specifically proscribes one particular profit-oriented practice (the rapid flipping of shoes) and promotes the practice of sharing "on feet" pictures; these are pictures in which the participant is clearly wearing their sneakers outside, rendering them no longer "deadstock" and thus significantly lowering their resale value (Figure 1).

> Kenny: The *Jordan Talk* [Facebook group] used to be about sharing "on feet" pictures but now everyone is just selling, selling, *selling*. So me and some friends started *Sole Love Crew*, and I think it's the only forum [in Sweden] that has exclusively "on feet" pictures. We are quite tough on that, and if you want to sell above retail price, it has to be at least six months after the release date. So you can't buy the shoe one day and sell it the next.

This group was explicitly started as a reaction to other, more established groups organically shifting towards profit-motivated trading activities as highly-motivated resellers flooded the groups, crowding out other users' posts. *Sole Love Crew*'s trading restrictions resulted in the group being communally curated as a space for participants to share less "hyped" sneakers and those with more of a personal meaning for the forum's members. These will often be shoes that are part of extensive collections assembled over significant amounts of time. Thus, participants demonstrate their long-term commitment to and knowledge of the culture as well as their disinterest in financial profit.

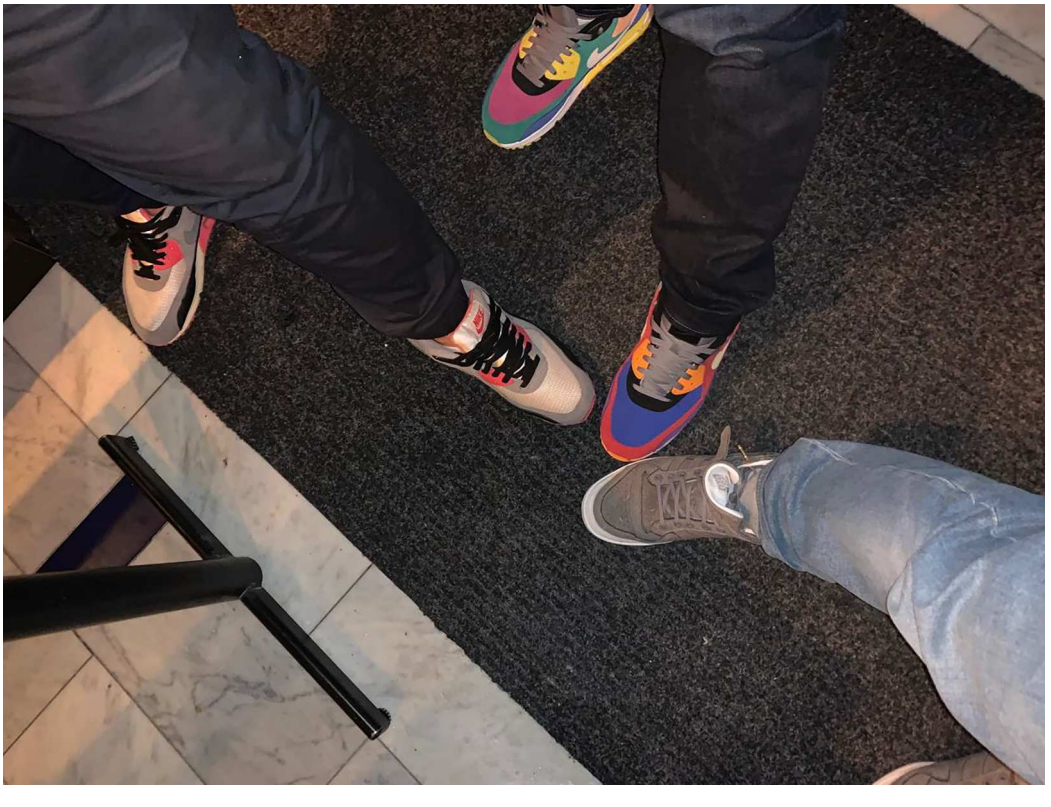

Figure 1. An obligatory shoe "meetup shot."' The "group selfie" of the sneaker world.

However, while sneakerheads don't relish the practices of hypebeasts, they are loath to describe these practices as "illegitimate," acknowledging them as an inherent part of the culture.

> Kareem (sneakerhead): For me it's both. I *hate it*, because I want people to have the shoes that's really gonna' rock the shoes. But then on the other side of the coin, I understand that the resale market drives the culture. So, for me I'm kinda' on both sides. But I don't like resellers. I want people to wear the shoes and enjoy the shoes – the *collectors*. Not the ones that wanna' make a quick buck out of a release.

Deadstock[1] condition sneakers and copping on drop day have become less important to Clerics, having become overwhelmingly associated with the practices of resellers and hypebeasts. This is both symbolic *and* practical: shoes that no longer fulfil deadstock criteria are more affordable, and with more shoes being bought by people who show little interest in keeping them for a significant time as part of a collection, "second hand" shoes show up in consignment stores relatively soon after release and in good condition. Jason, a long-term sneakerhead in his early 20s, spoke of how he explicitly eschews the online trading platforms that deal exclusively in mint condition, "deadstock" shoes in favor of putting in extra effort to seek out sneakers that have been lightly worn:

> Jason: I don't get off of GOAT, I don't buy off of StockX. I go to Flight Club[2] for inspiration and see like, culture and ideas, but, those prices are a little ridiculous. I tend to go to eBay and I look for people who have sold hundreds of shoes in the past, have high ratings and strong reviews. I look for shoes that have been worn … 2 to 5 times, that's pretty specific. Every one is VNDS – that's the cultural term for "very near deadstock."' So you knock off maybe, 15, 20% of the price for a shoe that looks … *nearly* new.

Concerns regarding how the nature of sneaker culture is becoming increasingly mercantile are not, however, limited to those veteran participants who feel compelled to adapt due to being priced out of the market. Hakeem (sneakerhead) has a professional journalistic position within sneaker culture and, as such, is often directly gifted highly desirable shoes by brands. However, despite being an influential voice within the culture and working for an organization that arguably trades on and propagates hype,[3] he finds it difficult to reconcile himself with the amounts of money that certain shoes are now able to attain on the secondary market. When asked if he had ever resold shoes, he related the following:

> Hakeem: Yeah, for sure. If you're going to use this in your final piece I think maybe I'd rather be anonymous, but I've definitely err … sold some stuff, yeah. I sold a few of the Off White Jordans that I got – like, they're a dope shoe but it's really hard to justify wearing a shoe that you could, y'know, sell for a thousand dollars. That's a vacation.

Exclusivity is a key concern for sneakerheads, and there is an acceptance that the culture involves spending amounts of money that are significant to the participants. However, it was striking to us just how central more frugal considerations were in the cultural discourse. Chase (sneakerhead) is a sneaker collector in his 40s with a well-paying job, and one of the reasons he is attracted to his favorite style of shoe (the Air Max 1) is that "they're still humanely-priced compared to a lot of the other shoes. They're, y'know, 120 bucks. Which is pretty 'fair' these days." At a later point, Chase would also relate to the first author that when a shoe that he had been looking forward to buying was released at $20 above the expected retail price, that was enough for him to forego entering the release raffles. Victor is a sneakerhead who has worked at a number of well-known boutique sneaker

[1]The term "deadstock" originates from a time when sneakerheads would scour the backrooms and storerooms of sneaker stores for past season models and colorways of shoes the store owners deemed were not going to sell. These shoes were removed from the main retail space and thus remained untouched and waiting to be discovered. These days, the term is largely synonymous with "mint condition".

[2]A famous New York consignment store that acts as an agent selling highly exclusive, deadstock sneakers on behalf of clients.

[3]For obvious reasons of confidentiality, it is not possible for us to reveal which organization this is, however, its name is instantly recognizable to even casual participants in sneaker and streetwear culture.

Figure 2. The 2018 Jordan X Levis Jordan 4s that the first author was wearing when accosted in the clothes store.

stores, and spoke of how he was reluctant to buy a particular pair of shoes, even with an employee discount:

> Victor: I've wanted a pair [of Visvim FTBs] for years but the actual erm, price of them in terms of retail price was far too high, even with "discount," so to speak, when I've worked at places who stock them.

The first author also personally experienced a particular instance of how paying *less* for shoes was viewed in a positive light by sneakerheads. While in a clothes store wearing a pair of sneakers that he had won the right to buy in a store raffle (and which had subsequently attained a significant secondary market price), he was approached by the owner of the store who glanced down at the shoes and asked, "How much did you pay for those?" The author responded with the one word answer, "Retail," and received an approving nod from the store owner. Several participants would later go on to reinforce this observation, acknowledging that the desirability of sneakers was often well-reflected in their secondary market value, but that they did not confer prestige onto participants in the culture who had merely paid a lot for shoes. The adeptness with which Clerics navigate institutional logics within the organizational field is perhaps the most potent evidence of the power that their field-dependent cultural capital grants them. Disruptive entrants have, through economic power, somewhat changed the rules of the game and powerful actors have, for equally economic reasons, enabled their activities. However, while Clerics recognize these shifts, they are still able to simultaneously maintain practices and ideologies within the field that directly challenge – and even devalue – those that are more economically motivated (Figure 2).

Repurposing disruptive practices

As related above, secondary market prices above the symbolic one-thousand-dollar mark are increasingly common, reflecting both what our participants regarded as a notable increase in the social media-fuelled hype surrounding sneakers, and the thriving secondary market facilitated by online trading platforms. For "hypebeasts," this appears to primarily involve the act of acquiring hyped shoes and then signaling cultural capital through sharing pictures of them wearing the shoes on social media. They will utilize bots to cheat raffle systems and, financial situations allowing, pay exorbitant secondary market prices for these sneakers, often wearing/owning them only briefly, then reselling them or otherwise discarding them in order to move on to the next release. As Kareem (sneakerhead) explained, "most of the time hypebeasts like to 'show off,' they wanna' take a photo and post on Instagram, then they will sell it the next week." The physical "owning" and collecting of the material objects appears to have been superseded by a form of less tangible, technologically-mediated participation. Over the course of our research, two different participants who were highly adept at technologically manipulating online releases both related how it was the opportunity to use their skills to game the system that first drew them towards sneaker culture.

Eli (hypebeast and reseller): I guess the way I really got into it was … I like to sort of … cheat and manipulate systems in anything I do. Does that make sense? So, I think sneaker culture was a natural step for me to go there, if that makes sense.

Justin (reseller): I had a friend who worked at Caliroots. And one day he was like, "Yo, do you know some stuff about IT? Can you help me get Supreme?" So I was like "Right, I'll work on some things … " I tried to buy three Box Logos and I got two of them. So he got his and I got one. And I saw the [resale] price, they were going for like $1000. And I'm like, fuck man, I'm going to put my shit on eBay – it sold in like, 5 minutes for $1100. And I'm like, yeah, it took me nothing to accomplish this.

Technologically proficient and highly motivated entrants such as these have now made it next to impossible for regular consumers to have any reasonable hope of winning a release raffle through legitimate means by, for example, manually entering raffles only once (Deleon 2020). Entrepreneurial opportunities now abound within the consumption field, and the brands whose shoes attain increased cultural value through acute scarcity and inflated secondary market prices (Dolbec and Parmentier 2019) are reluctant to enact policies that would entirely prevent the activities of resellers and others who otherwise circumvent the raffle and release systems.[4]

In a tacit acceptance that these disruptive new practices are now entrenched within the culture, Clerics now participate in their own system-gaming strategies such as organizing "communal" raffle signups in order to increase the chances of people who want to *possess* and *use* the shoes (rather than make financial or social media gains) acquiring them at retail rather than secondary market price.

Kareem (sneakerhead) and Ahmad (sneakerhead) spoke about a particular online community that cooperatively organizes raffle entries:

Ahmad: We're together in a community on Facebook that's called "Retail Gang" … for people that *love* sneakers but don't wanna' pay the resale prices. So we help each other out with entries on the raffles. That's how we started [our friendship]. So, if he wants a pair in his size and with a silhouette *I* don't want, me, my wife, and my friends sign up for *his* raffle. And if we win it, he gets it for the price it *cost*.

Kareem: Yeah, so instead of entering a raffle with one ticket, maybe. Then you have a network of friends where you can have *twenty* entries or *thirty* entries. And it means you have a better chance of winning the pair.

[4]In October of 2022, Nike did indeed release a statement concerning updated terms of service designed to hinder and penalize resellers. This statement also detailed a "reward" system for consumers deemed not to be resellers, randomly assigning privileges such as early access to certain releases. It remains to be seen if this strategy will have any significant impact on the activities of resellers (Pacheco 2022).

More systematized versions of these community groups have also recently arisen. *SoleSavy* is an online platform that charges members a $33 monthly fee in return for greatly increased chances of buying shoes at retail prices. This is accomplished through the deployment of similar technological strategies to those used by large-scale resellers. Furthermore, the platform promotes notions of "community",[5] policing and interdicting the activities of for-profit resellers and organizing physical meet-ups, swap meets, and other events with a more social, cultural orientation. The photos used as illustrations on the platform also overwhelmingly feature people wearing venerable, culturally significant shoes that clearly show signs of use.

These practices are notable for demonstrating a willingness to adapt to the changing nature of sneaker culture, utilizing the same technologies employed by disruptive entrants to "game" the system, but with more altruistic intent. In doing so, they continue to foster – and even strengthen – the notions of community and *ownership* of the material objects that are so often expressed as central to their participation. Returning to our central conceit of power being the ability to enact one's will, Clerics demonstrate that they are able to repurpose disruptive practices, in some cases even in a manner that significantly alters long-standing institutional logics (e.g. altering the stigma towards second-hand and obviously used shoes). However, these are not Sandıkcı and Ger (2010)'s or Scaraboto and Fischer (2013)'s relatively powerless individual actors succeeding through force of numbers. Instead, Clerics are able to exert their will in creating "protected spaces" within consumption fields; their existing field-dependent cultural capital mandates their actions, even providing opportunities to "legitimize" distasteful practices.

Legitimacy exchange

Above, we have focused on data that demonstrate *how* consumer Clerics engage in institutional work that positions themselves relative to the emerging institutional logics of their consumption field and enables them to repurpose disruptive practices. We next offer insight illustrating the nature of and reasons behind this mutual engagement between Clerics, disruptive entrants, and powerful institutional actors (such as brands). These actors are asymmetrically powerful, with the brands dominating and having the most ability to steer the consumption field. As demonstrated above, the brands have enabled and even embraced the activities of resellers and other secondary market operators, ultimately diminishing the power and influence of the "moral" arbiters of the field which we term consumer Clerics. We use the term "moral" here to mean that these actors are seen as legitimate authorities in judging whether the actions taken by the companies are in harmony with the "spirit of the practice," as defined by the particular subculture in which the consumer Clerics are embedded. The asymmetrically powerful interplay between these actors is of particular interest to an institutional theory-oriented investigation, as from this perspective impressions of legitimacy are understood to be inversely proportional to the perceived power of an actor in an institutional field (DiMaggio 1988); dominant actors and entities in a field can only maintain legitimacy if the extent of their dominance is not recognized. Below, we offer evidence both of how powerful actors palliate their dominance through concessional strategies that satisfy and engage Clerics, and of how disruptive entrants (i.e. resellers) perform certain of the "more legitimate" practices and ideologies of the increasingly less dominant Clerics.

Palliation of power

The big three sneaker brands (Nike, Jordan, and Adidas) have long utilized a "tiered" account system, granting only a small number of retailers the ability to stock their most desirable models. These tier systems are notoriously opaque, and seem to be more reliant on the "coolness" of a retailer and its staff and the store owners' relationships with brand reps than any readily quantifiable metric

[5]On the landing page of *Solesavy*, visitors are greeted with the slogan "Come for the sneakers, and stay for the community" (https://solesavy.com/).

(Denny 2020). But within the past five years, these strategies were regarded by the participants as having escalated; that is, the ability of brands to enact their will over retailers is perceived as having become more pronounced. A particular example of one of these strategies (though by no means the only one) was owners of high-tier boutique stores being pressured to stock and promote new models in order to have access to more desirable models. Antrel (sneakerhead) is a senior partner of a Europe-based, high-tier sneaker boutique store and is intimately involved in decisions concerning what products the store carries. As with the overwhelming majority of boutique sneaker and streetwear stores, Antrel has participated in the culture for a great deal of time and he and his knowledgeable staff are the human points of contact in the retail spaces associated with collectable and hyped sneakers. However, he related that decisions concerning what to stock are not entirely in the hands of the retailer in question and gave an insight into the process of physically visiting an Adidas retail showroom to pick out next season's stock:

> Antrel: Sometimes we want a model and they say "No, it's *lower* than your level" for example … Or "That style is over for you now, since you've been doing it" [for so long]. And very often stores are asking "Oh, we want to sell this line that you have." And then when they [try to order it] they're not allowed to because it's not their type of store.

Boutique stores attain high-tier status through becoming "cool" and getting noticed by the big brands, usually by demonstrating their ability to recognize up-and-coming underground brands and emerging trends. The particular coolness of these boutique stores largely comes from their ability to autonomously go against the major trends dominating the mainstream market (cf. Warren and Campbell 2014) by, for example, juxtaposing desirable items acknowledged by the mainstream market with unexpected items that are thus consecrated in a position of coolness. At least to those in the know. It is sneakerheads who understand and actively participate in the culture that establish these stores, and the brands therefore benefit greatly from their association with them. The boutique stores are initially given limited access to certain products in order to ascertain their cultural status and business competence (Puma, Dunne, and Welty 2023). The brands will continue to dictate what stock these boutiques are allowed to carry in order to maintain access to their account (and hopefully ascend to higher tiers). Thus, the brands both cultivate a market operated by passionate, driven, and culturally knowledgeable participants and also maintain a "buffer zone" between themselves and the ultimate consumer, obfuscating their control and augmenting their legitimacy.

There are other, more general examples of ways in which the brands exercise high levels of control over the retail environments in which their products exist. In recent years, Adidas has aggressively segregated their heritage "Originals" line of products (identifiable by the "Trefoil" flower logo) and their general sportswear "Equipment" line (identifiable by the "Slanted Mountain" logo). Our participant Antrel's store was compelled to substantially reorganize the business, including its physical premises, in order to retain access to their high-tier Adidas account. This last policy was similarly a principal motivating factor in the multinational sports retailer "Stadium" opening a sub-brand boutique store called "Sneakers Point" in order to retain their account's access to Trefoil-branded "Adidas Originals" products. Beginning in 2017, Nike also began an aggressive and well-publicized policy of cutting ties with large retailers called the "Consumer Direct Offense." The stated objective of this policy was to have a more direct line to consumers through the removal of middleman retailers, and as of 2019 it is credited with a 73% increase in Nike's stock (George-Parkin 2019). However, this strategy has garnered criticism within the sneakerhead community due to long-established, small-scale accounts also being summarily canceled. In one article on the highly influential streetwear blog *Highsnobiety* (a media entity that is overwhelmingly a flag waver for Nike and the other brands it covers), the author is particularly scathing of Nike's obstinate pursuit of a monolithic culture and their callous discarding of long-term partners:

> But does [Nike's strategy] have to exist at the expense of loyal institutions that make up a vital component of their community? Don't we have room for both? Is the company image really tarnished by such blips in the ocean stores? Does empowering people through sport – as is a favorite Nike line – only apply in certain

> circumstances, so long as the company can make its money? And surely there's a classier way of bringing these long-running partnerships to an end than sending an email? Ultimately, it all comes down to the indiscriminate capitalist machine. The fact that stories, knowledge, and careers are crushed in it is just part of our grim modern reality. (Campbell 2020)

The Consumer Direct Offense was openly publicized by Nike, though vocal criticism of the policy (both within online communities and among our participants) serves to support the notion that the legitimacy of dominant actors can be undermined when this dominance is openly wielded. In comparison, Adidas' brand segregation policy was enacted quietly and only related to us by industry professionals, drawing much less ire and criticism from the wider community.

The juxtaposition of Nike and Adidas' policies, as related above, illustrates how the actions of powerful institutional actors can have a detrimental effect on their perceived legitimacy by other actors in an organizational field upon which they rely to do business. These developments are currently unfolding, and the repercussions, particularly for Nike, remain to be seen. However, leaked minutes and slides from an internal meeting in October 2021 show that Nike is far from oblivious to the consequences of them being perceived as flaunting their ability to enact their will and failing to adhere to the institutional logics of the organizational field[6] (Dunne 2021). Ron Faris, the global Vice President of Nike's online release platform "SNKRS," was reported as saying "Our fairness numbers are not where they should be. They're at, like, the mid-20s; they need to be in the 80s" (Dunne 2021). Faris would go on to lament that the increasingly high resale prices of sneakers were disaffecting the consumers who originally shaped the culture, stating that:

> We're gonna' shape the marketplace to reflect the community we serve. Especially in Black and brown [*sic*] communities and Asian communities, so that we actually show and we actually give equity and inclusion to the communities that have been gentrified out and alienated by the resale market.

In this meeting, Faris also cautioned that consumers, disheartened with the difficulty in attaining desirable Nike sneakers through official channels or without paying exorbitant secondary market prices, were beginning to migrate to smaller competitors. With brands such as Reebok and Puma experiencing significant growth both in their overall sales figures and increased resale prices (Gorsler 2021; Miller 2023; Vuong 2021), this concern would appear to be warranted.

Powerful actors within sneaker culture seem to be explicitly aware of the disquiet caused to "the community they serve" by the rapidly increasing mastery that professional resellers have over retail channels; these disruptive new entrants drive the feedback loop of social media hype and exorbitant secondary market prices, making it all but impossible for more "typical" consumers to purchase new shoes at retail price (Diaz 2018). However, there seems to be relative consensus among industry commentators that the secondary market is highly-valued among the powerful actors (i.e. the brands) within the organizational field (Dolbec and Parmentier 2019). Addressing the question of Nike's reluctance to significantly increase either the supply or retail price of desirable sneakers, noted sneaker industry data analyst Josh Luber[7] said that:

> They would rather err on the side of leaving money on the table than risk disrupting the secondary market and all the marketing, brand cachet, PR and hype that comes with having a really vibrant secondary market. (Chow 2014)

Indeed, smaller retailers have successfully deployed technological strategies that make it all but impossible for resellers to unfairly buy up large quantities of sneakers, but to date, the large brands have been reluctant to deploy the same measures on online platforms such as Nike's "SNKRS" app (Metselaar 2021; Slade 2019).

[6]These leaked notes were obtained and published by the *Complex.com* website (Dunne 2021). Complex Networks is a youth culture media entity principally concerned with popular and emerging trends in style, sneakers, food, music, sports, and pop culture.

[7]Josh Luber, formerly an IBM data analyst, was the founder of the sneaker sales data analysis blog *Campless*. This blog evolved into the trading platform *StockX* in 2015. *StockX* has since developed into the de facto primary sneaker market trading and valuation platform.

Figure 3. The Air Max III Radiant Red 2020 retro, complete with 90s style shoe box (first author's own).

The disruptive entrance and growing dominance of resellers coupled with concerns over the big brands not reigning in their excesses is, however, recognized by powerful actors as running the risk of causing the departure of Clerics from the consumption field. In December 2020, Nike rereleased one of their most storied and recognizable sneakers, the Infrared colorway of the Air Max 90 (originally released in 1990). The attention to detail of the release resonated strongly with Clerics, from the high-fidelity reproduction of the shoe's original shape and materials, to the accurate shade of fluorescent red on the shoe and the 1990 style shoebox (complete with a reproduction of an original 1990 advertising insert). Nike even released the shoe under its original name, the "Air Max III Radiant Red" – a revelation to an entire generation of sneakerheads who discovered that they had not known the "true" name of one of their favorite shoes. However, aside from the faithful recreation of a shoe of significant importance to sneaker culture, Nike ensured that enough pairs were released through enough retail outlets that virtually everyone who wanted a pair was able to buy them. An influential sneaker vlogger, who goes by the name *Mr. Foamer Simpson*, summed up the unexpected pleasure of the experience of just buying the shoes (Figure 3):

> I was able to snag them online, which feels rare these days. I didn't need to battle bots or refresh the page and jump through a bunch of internet hoops. Sometimes buying sneakers, you feel like you're battling White Walkers … Too Dramatic … ? It's *hard* to get sneakers sometimes. And I actually didn't realize, or, I kinda' forgot, what it *feels like*, right? And, y'know, you can forget what it's like, to see a sneaker, like that sneaker, and then go buy that sneaker … I know, it's a crazy concept (!). The irony is, this might be the best Nike sneaker of all time. (Lytle 2020)

While this is a particularly pertinent example, it is certainly not without precedent, with Nike in particular sporadically rereleasing culturally significant shoes with high-fidelity details that Clerics

admire and in numbers large enough to temper the activities of resellers. The deftness with which Nike managed the numbers of the release of the Air Max III Radiant Red retro can be attested to by the fact that the shoe did indeed sell out, but that its resale value on the secondary market was, one year later, at or around the retail price at which it released (StockX 2021). Other brands have also been seen mimicking this hi-fi retro strategy, with Adidas' 2021 release of the 1980s Forum basketball sneaker being an apt example (Paz 2021).

Powerful actors within the organizational field of sneaker consumption seem particularly cognizant of the norms and values of the field, as well as the perils of being seen to flaunt their power over less powerful actors. While there is evidence of brands such as Nike seemingly misjudging the reaction of the field to their growth strategies (and understanding how to mitigate them), these reactions serve to support the institutional theory insight of the fragility of even powerful actors' legitimacy.

Adoption of legitimate practices and ideologies

As addressed above, field-dependent cultural capital is a key concern for consumer Clerics, far outweighing that of economic capital (either being in possession of, or seeking). Over the course of our investigation, we saw abundant evidence of resellers expressing engagement with the institutional logics of Clerics and working to incorporate certain of them into their own practices. In line with more traditional notions of community and friendship, Eli (hypebeast and reseller) spoke of the meaningful relationships that he had made through his participation in the culture. When asked what he ultimately liked about the culture he said the following:

> Eli: The enthusiasm, the passion. A lot of us share a lot of common traits, I mean, there's myself, and one of my colleagues, we're in a pretty good community but we're sort of … all the way from 14 years old to probably 22, and, being 28, we're the oldest guys in the group. But it's nice though, because we go to these conventions as a group, we sell trainers as a group, and it's kind of like – I wouldn't say it's as far as say, an extended family, but we've got each other's backs with a lot of things, y'know? And you would never come across these sorts of people without some sort of … *unless* … The only other thing I can compare it to is kind of like, online games, and just randomly finding people on there. But it's, it's just different. And sharing the love for it, whether it's actually for the sneaker itself or whether it's for the resale end … the thrill of it. Everyone has a sort of like, common belief in that.

While Eli's reselling activities are more of a "side hustle" and the means by which he acquires the desirable shoes that are now a significant part of his identity, for other participants in the culture reselling has become their primary source of income. Justin is a successful reseller who moved away from a career working in IT for a large and well known multinational chemical company to pursue selling sneakers full-time. His first exposure to reselling came in 2016, and Justin's operation has since grown to be decidedly international, with sales made and stock held in Europe, the US, and China.

The first author first encountered Justin at a sneaker swap meet in early 2020. These events are as much cultural as they are an opportunity to buy and sell shoes, with attendees being sure to put a lot of effort into showing off their prized sneakers (and complementary outfits), as well as taking the opportunity to socialize and get glimpses of "grails"[8] out in the open. The first author was introduced to Justin by another participant in the study who was also the organizer of the event. What was somewhat surprising was the genuine warmth with which Justin was treated by other attendees, even those that the first author knew to have expressed a somewhat "fundamentalist" disdain for resale practices. The first author personally witnessed Justin enthusiastically engage in deep conversations about sneaker culture and the minutiae of particular models and colorways with several other attendees while also negotiating deals (both buying and selling). The depth of Justin's knowledge as well as his enthusiasm for the culture was also made clear in the interview conducted after the event (Figures 4–6).

[8]Highly desirable and very rare shoes.

Figure 4. Swap meets in Stockholm, Sweden.

To summarize, the more mercenary, mercantile, and less ownership-centered logics of sneaker culture – while at odds with that of the more culturally "moral" Clerics – have in fact become legitimate means of participation in the culture. For some participants, reselling was what first drew them to the culture and was the means by which they operationalized their participation. They learned the dark arts of gaming the system to "underhandedly" acquire desirable sneakers both to wear themselves, and to make significant profits, yet these actors are still clearly able to demonstrate genuine affection for and comprehension of the culture.

Discussion and conclusion

Our investigation has sought to describe a form of consumer not previously identified in the literature and which we have termed "Consumer Clerics." We define Consumer Clerics as high-involvement, high cultural capital participants, who engage non-antagonistically in volatile consumption fields. We find that consumer Clerics' participation is exemplified in three principal ways: through navigating these changing logics by avoiding certain practices and emphasizing the importance of others; by repurposing disruptive practices for their own ends; and graciously engaging with powerful and disruptive actors in a process of asymmetric legitimacy exchange.

Our research builds upon prior research in two ways. First, we identify a previously overlooked but nevertheless consequential cohort of consumers. These high field-dependent cultural capital consumers demonstrate dissatisfaction with developments in their consumption field but are overwhelmingly unantagonistic towards its changing logics. The increasingly complex and consumer-driven nature of market dynamics, principally brought about by the increased online presence of consumers, has accordingly resulted in an increase in academic interest in and investigation of

Figure 5. Swap meets in Stockholm, Sweden.

the emerging categories, motivations, and roles of consumers in changing consumption contexts. Authors within these research streams often frame these developments in terms of the *work* that consumers – often reluctantly – engage in within consumption contexts. For example, Martin and Schouten (2014) describe how consumers facilitate and codify the formation of a market, resulting in the necessity of marketers engaging with and understanding their practices in order to enter the market in question. Essamri, McKechnie, and Winklhofer (2019) offer a managerially-oriented model of how brand managers should seek to engage with stakeholders in order to better understand the wider perceptions of their brands and acknowledge that "fans and customers continuously reflect, negotiate, validate or object to discrepancies with their perception or corporate brand identity" (373). Cova and Dalli (2009), on the other hand, challenge the notion of consumers acting as "harmonious" co-producers and describe how the labor of enthusiastic participants in a consumption context is exploited, rendering consumers *workers* serving to enrich powerful actors rather than co-producers receiving a fair share of the spoils.

Consumer Clerics are mostly unremarkable consumers in terms of how they codify institutional logics, engage in institutional work, and arguably have their labor exploited by powerful actors. However, they are exceptional in being treated with an amount of reverence by both powerful actors and disruptive entrants that appears inordinate to their economic importance, leading to them playing a key role in the evolution of the market. Clerics function as repositories and curators of legitimate culture and practices; lodestars that both disruptive new actors and established entities can reference to ensure they don't stray too far or too quickly from the institutional legitimacy that is essential to their success. The Clerics' legitimacy emanates from their status as cool, which in turn stems from their high level of field-dependent cultural capital that they exhibit in a disinterested manner, opting to capitalize on it neither for fame nor fortune. The continued involvement of

Figure 6. Swap meets in Stockholm, Sweden.

actors with subcultural capital is essential to a field such as sneaker consumption. The participation of these long-suffering subcultural actors is maintained with lip-service being paid to their importance and the occasional "treat," but they have long since been conditioned not to challenge the hegemony in any significant fashion. Clerics are resigned to their diminished ability to profoundly affect the business practices of the powerful actors in their field; gone are the days when sneakerheads could influence Nike to revisit and fundamentally alter a release and manufacturing strategy purely because sneakerheads *liked* the shoes (Denny 2020).

Issues of who has the power to influence brand strategy have been addressed by previous research, focusing on issues such as the complexity of upholding a consistent brand image over time in an environment characterized by constant change (Preece, Kerrigan, and O'Reilly 2019) and influential consumer groups that can cause a brand to fall apart (Parmentier and Fischer 2015). In his study of how brands change over time, Giesler (2012) proposes a dialectical model whereby brands adapt their marketing strategies to counter the effects of various doppelgänger brand images that emerge as consumers, the media, and popular culture criticize the brand. Brands thereby develop by way of a thesis (brand strategy) that is challenged by an antithesis (doppelgänger brand strategy) and ultimately resolved through a synthesis (revised brand strategy). The changing strategies of brands are, from this perspective, understood as a process overwhelmingly orchestrated by brand owners' strategic decisions that counter the doppelgänger brand images produced by entities external to the brand. Our research shows an even more complex picture in which consumer Clerics have their own understanding of legitimate brand practices, and to some degree the power to influence strategic branding decisions. Clerics are thereby seen as authorities in possession of legitimate moral standards concerning what brands should stand for in accordance with extant "brand lore." In light of Clerics' moral standards, some of the actions taken by companies

themselves might, within this particular context, be seen to create doppelgänger brand images. Nike's "Consumer Direct Offense," as discussed above, offers an apposite example of this (George-Parkin 2019). When the brand, in an effort to reduce middle men and communicate more directly with consumers, ended many long-term relationships with smaller mom and pop style stores, they created a brand image that was incompatible with the view held by many of its core consumers, particularly consumer Clerics. This judgment of Nike's actions led, in essence, to the creation of a company-generated doppelgänger brand image. This is akin to the description by Molander, Ostberg, and Peñaloza (2023) of how certain consumers previously loyal to the fashion brand Cheap Monday abandoned the brand after it was purchased by mainstream fast fashion company H&M. In effect, this managerial decision likewise produced a company-generated doppelgänger brand image. Influential consumers' judgments of significant developments can thus significantly contribute to a process of brand morphogenesis (Molander, Ostberg, and Peñaloza 2023), whereby the brand is born again, albeit in incongruous guise.

The second contribution our research makes is describing a process of legitimacy exchange between asymmetrically powerful actors. Prior institutional theory-oriented research has robustly investigated the various ways in which market dynamics can be challenged by both overt (Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli 2015; Giesler 2008, 2012; Holt 2002; Jafari and Goulding 2008; Kozinets 2002; Sandıkcı and Ger 2010; Saren, Parsons, and Goulding 2019; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007; Weijo, Martin, and Arnould 2018) and covert activism (Ghaffari, Jafari, and Sandıkcı 2019). It has even been demonstrated that large groups of increasingly interconnected consumers can unintentionally effect substantial change in markets (Dolbec and Fischer 2015). Our research, on the other hand, exemplifies a notably asymmetric exchange of legitimacy. That legitimacy is reciprocal is well understood within institutional theory, and powerful actors such as brands both obtain legitimacy from and confer it upon other actors (Handelman and Arnold 1999; Humphreys 2010). Big brands have even been regarded by marginalized communities as allies by conferring legitimacy on them through open and sustained engagement (Kates 2004). We demonstrate that the continued participation of Clerics in the consumption field in question is useful to powerful actors seeking legitimacy through association with a highly knowledgeable and engaged cohort of consumers. Specifically, Clerics gain their legitimacy in the form of coolness through their refusal to be controlled by "the system" (cf. Brown 2021). Instead, they are just compliant enough to retain their independence while still reaping the benefits of their close connections with the brands who have more overt types of power. Clerics work to maintain the foundational attitudes and values upon which ideas such as sneaker culture were founded, but which increasingly run the risk of being overrun by emerging economic concerns and disruptive entrants: attitudes and values which require curation so as not to become anachronisms. We also show that disruptive entrants do indeed see the status of Clerics as desirable, adopting and replicating certain of their practices. Clerics are kept engaged in the consumption field by both their own efforts to keep their practices "fun" and by the "small wins" (Mumby et al. 2017) they are occasionally granted by powerful actors in recognition of their role as bestowers of legitimacy.

As noted by Gabriel and Lang (2015), the fact that consumers carry out work in their day-to-day consumption activities is "self-evident" (Ch.11) and the twentieth century has seen a rapid increase in the spheres in which consumers are expected to do work (Cova, Dalli, and Zwick 2011). We now assemble furniture, select and check out our groceries, wait our own tables, and so on. Until relatively recently, big brands would go to great lengths *not* to be associated with subcultural actors and movements (Hebdige 1979; Leland 2004; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Now we see evidence of brands not only engaging with subcultures, but utilizing the labor that subcultural actors employed to gain their legitimacy for the brand's own reputation management. Remuneration for these activities is, as described above, symbolic and sparse for Clerics. Furthermore, reputation management has traditionally been the purview of professionals who were paid for their work.

The academic study of consumers first emerged with a focus on how consumers reacted to marketing messages and activities: the agency of consumers themselves was largely overlooked in the

pursuit of selling more *things*. In the 1980s, marketing scholarship began to pay a significant amount of attention to consumers' agency so as to describe how they both navigated the market and were able to turn the tables on marketers. This perspective has been particularly dominant in the field of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), and CCT scholars have addressed what might be considered both the more "positive" agentic activities of consumers as well as the negative. More positive activities include how consumers create and manage their own identities (Belk 1988) and conduct activism (Brandão and Popoli 2022) to shape markets and consumption practices so as to better reflect their own desires and moral positions. Darker agentic practices such as consuming in order to "have at the expense of others" (Cluley and Dunne 2012, 253) and the melancholia that emerges from participation in communities (Wickstrom, Denny, and Hietanen 2021) have also been addressed. Our study instead casts a light on an insidious "stripping away" of the agency of consumers with extraordinarily high cultural capital that they have attained through investment of time, effort, and passion. Future studies might attempt to identify similar instances of consumers with high field-dependent cultural capital becoming increasingly symbolic and less powerful Clerics, or even cases of these consumers succeeding in reclaiming power. Power and legitimacy are complex and volatile topics, and made no less so within mixes of social and commercial constructions such as consumption fields. While we feel that our treatment of power relations in this study has accomplished our principal goal of identifying and describing the concept of consumer Clerics, we would welcome future studies that focused more directly on the nature and scope of the changing power relations between actors in consumption fields. As Munir (2015) writes, while

> institutional theory is … wide ranging and critical in the sense of attacking the rational, functionalist, and often Panglossian [*sic*] views emanating from the ultimate imperialist discipline of economics … even the staunchest defenders of new institutionalism acknowledge that it needs to further develop its existing sensibility for the nuanced way in which power operates in social life. (90)

In closing, we reflect on the popular notion that consumption is increasingly replacing religion as a way to "make sense of and deal with transcendence" (Varul 2015) and how it is only appropriate that consumer Clerics are thereby assuming some of the authority previously manifested by religious clerics. At the same time, we note how the consumer Clerics in our case are symbolically dethroned by the brands' authoritarian practices and wonder whether this will, in the long run, contribute to lifting the veil of the magical brands and instead exposing them as the truly profane symbols that they really are.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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