

Demythologizing Consumption Practices: How Consumers Protect Their Field-Dependent Identity Investments from Devaluing Marketplace Myths

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Marketplace myths are commonly conceptualized as cultural resources that attract consumers to a consumption activity or brand. This theoretical orientation is prone to overstating the extent to which consumers' identity investments in a field of consumption are motivated by an associated marketplace myth. We provide a theoretical corrective to this tendency by investigating consumers who have become vested in a commercially mythologized consumption field through an incremental process of building social connections and cultural capital. For these consumers, the prevailing marketplace myth is experienced as a trivialization of their aesthetic interests, rather than as a source of identity value. In response, they employ demythologizing practices to insulate their acquired field-dependent social and cultural capital from devaluation. Our findings advance theorizations concerning marketplace myths and consumer identity work and explicate the sociocultural forces that deter consumers from abandoning a consumption field that has become culturally associated with undesirable meanings.

A couple of weeks ago, me and my friend went to this show in the student art gallery and then we went and hung out in the coffee shop for a while and then later that night we went to yoga, and I was like, "Does this mean we're hipsters?" (Kate)

From the rebellious aura of Harley-Davidson bikes to the utopian ethos of *Star Trek*, consumer researchers have

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extensively investigated the sociocultural processes and practices through which consumption activities, material goods, and brands become conduits for marketplace myths (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008; Giesler 2008; Holt 2004; Holt and Thompson 2004; Kozinets 2001; McCracken 2005; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Thompson and Tian 2008; Zhao and Belk 2008). These studies have primarily focused on analytic cases where consumers are drawn, at least in part, to a consumption activity or brand by a marketplace myth and, in turn, use these commercially mediated meanings to advance their personal and collectively shared identity projects (Arnould and Thompson 2005). These studies commonly assume that consumers seek out these resonant marketplace myths to help assuage salient sociocultural conflicts or contradictions that affect their everyday lives (Diamond et al. 2009; Holt 2002, 2006; Muniz and Schau 2005; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Thompson 2004). As Holt (2004, 8) states, "Consumers use iconic brands as symbolic salves. They grab hold of the myth as they use the product as a means to lessen their identity burdens."

Our analysis addresses a quite different relationship be-

tween consumers' identity projects and the marketplace myths that culturally frame their consumption interests, tastes, and practices. Rather than being an iconic resource for identity construction (Holt 2004), the consumers in our study experience a marketplace myth as a threat to the value of their identity investments in a field of consumption (i.e., a network of interrelated consumption activities, brand and product constellations, and embedded social networks). They use demythologizing practices to protect these investments from devaluation and to distance and distinguish their field of consumption, and corresponding consumer identities, from these undesirable associations.

The term "demythologize" is most closely associated with Rudolph Bultman's (1984) effort to develop a method of biblical exegesis that could disentangle the sociological, material, and economic conditions represented in the New Testament from Christianity's metaphysical cosmology. In our consumer culture theory adaptation, we redefine demythologization as the practices, strategies, and counternarratives that consumers use to create symbolic boundaries between an identity-relevant field of consumption and an imposed marketplace myth that threatens the value of their identity investments.

Our conceptualization of demythologization builds on prior consumer research indicating that marketplace myths can sometimes acquire stigmatizing connotations that pose threats to consumers' identity projects. For example, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) discuss that hard-core members of the Harley-Davidson brand community engage in a number of ritualistic practices to distinguish themselves from the various cultural clichés that have been sparked by the brand's burgeoning mainstream popularity. Thompson and Arsel (2004) highlight some cases in which consumers feel impelled to hide their personal affinities for Starbucks from their friends and significant others who harbor antiglobalization and anticorporate politics-of-consumption beliefs. According to Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler (2010), impassioned Hummer owners confront the moralistic backlash directed at their vehicles by portraying themselves as heroic defenders of the American exceptionalist ideals and values represented by this iconic brand.

Kozinets (2001) provides the most developed theoretical explication of consumers' ambivalent relations to marketplace myths and the stigmatizing cultural associations they sometimes acquire. He discusses how *Star Trek* fans must negotiate the tensions between their devotion to *Star Trek's* utopian mythos and the nerdy, "get a life" social stigma that plagues those who make their fan identifications public. Drawing from Goffman, Kozinets (2001) argues that devoted Trekkers undergo a symbolic transformation from being a discreditable person (that is, a closeted fan who fears his/her identity would be spoiled if publicly identified as a Trekker) to being a discredited person (that is, one who proudly embraces and displays his/her fandom and accepts the stigmatizing consequences). According to Kozinets, such fans become more deeply involved in the fan community

itself and reinterpret its corresponding social stigma as a means to attain greater self-acceptance (Kozinets 2001).

In these cases, consumers are drawn to the consumption field by its affiliated marketplace myth and continue to garner identity value from these meanings, despite the stigmatizing associations that circulate in the broader culture. Devoted *Star Trek* fans may inveigh against the Trekkie stereotype, but they still take collective pride in enacting and promoting *Star Trek's* utopian ideals. Similarly, hardcore Harley riders may chafe at the bourgeois associations that Weekend Warriors and Rich Urban Bikers bring to their brand community, but they still resonate with the brand myth's core meanings of patriotism, rugged individualism, and rebellion against authority. Absent from this theoretical picture are consumers who view a prevailing marketplace myth not as an attraction or a source of identity value but instead as an unwanted and undesired cultural imposition on their consumption interests and related identity practices. As we will show, explanations for this dynamic are lacking in extant theorizations of consumers' use of identity myths (Holt 2004; Holt and Thompson 2004; Kozinets 2001; McCracken 2005), as well as social psychological accounts of identity signaling (Berger and Heath 2007, 2008).

Our study explores the identity investments that consumers make in the field of indie consumption, which has been culturally branded by the hipster marketplace myth. In the most direct sense, "indie" (short for independent) refers to artistic creations produced outside the auspices of media conglomerates and distributed through small-scale and often localized channels (e.g., nonchain local retailers, art-house theaters, DIY channels such as Web sites and zines, and other small-scale enterprises). However, the indie marketplace is embedded in a sociocultural system of collectively shared cultural knowledge, aesthetic tastes, social networks, and systems of social distinction and hierarchies (Fonarow 2006). Through these interlinkages, consumers' indie tastes and practices can also find expression in other aestheticized spheres of consumption, such as fashion and third-place servicescapes (e.g., cafés, clubs, bars, restaurants). As indie consumers build social connections and internalize the cultural logic of indie aesthetic tastes and standards, they also become increasingly aware that their consumer identities have been culturally framed by the hipster myth. For these consumers, the hipster myth is akin to a fun-house mirror that distorts and potentially devalues their cultural interests, aesthetic predilections, and social milieu.

In the following sections, we first provide a theoretical overview of the field-of-consumption construct and its conceptual relationship to marketplace myths. After describing our methodological procedures, we next present a historical analysis of how the indie consumption field became culturally branded by the hipster marketplace myth and media reflections on the resulting marketplace myth. We then explicate the incremental and often serendipitous processes through which consumers become vested in the indie field of consumption and which are largely divorced from the hipster marketplace myth itself. We close the theoretical loop

by analyzing the demythologizing practices that these consumers use to protect the field-dependent social and cultural capital they have accumulated through their identity investments in the indie field of consumption.

FIELDS OF CONSUMPTION AND DISAUTHENTICATING IDENTITY MYTHS

The concept of the field hails from the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1990) and has been most thoroughly applied and developed in the consumer culture theory (CCT) literature by Holt (1997, 1998; also see Allen 2002). The central premise of this conceptualization is that societies are organized into discrete and relatively autonomous socio-cultural domains that support specific kinds of status games. As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, 16–17) explain, “The field is simultaneously a space of conflict and competition . . . in which participants vie to establish monopoly over the species of capital effective in it—cultural authority in the artistic field, scientific authority in the scientific field, sacerdotal authority in the religious field, and so forth—and the power to decree hierarchy and all forms of conversion rates in the field of power.”

Bourdieu (1990) further characterizes the field as being analogous to a game—in the sense that it is structured by rules and regularities that guide players’ strategic moves in the field (while allowing for improvisational adaptations). These structural features govern the way in which various stakes (i.e., claims to status) are allocated among the competing players and also determine which moves in the field will be regarded as legitimate and status enhancing. Finally, the relative degree of comfort that players have in the game, and the extent to which they can successfully compete for status, is a function of the culturally and socially learned predispositions that they bring to the field.

Allen (2002) applies this Bourdieuan construct to analyze how consumers’ class backgrounds influence their movements and preferences in the field of secondary education and, conversely, how the secondary education game reinforces class hierarchies. Allen’s use of the field is highly consistent with Holt (1997, 1998), who conceptualizes society as an aggregation of distinct fields—such as the field of consumption, the field of academics, the field of politics, the field of religion—that are homologously structured; that is, each field reflects and reproduces, through its respective forms of status competition, the objective (or material) conditions of class stratification (Holt 1998, 4). From this standpoint, consumption is a specific sociocultural field that encompasses consumers’ tastes for food, fashion, art, media, and other lifestyle endeavors.

For researchers following in this Bourdieuan line of analysis, the consumption field is also a very significant societal domain because it displays the level of cultural capital that consumers possess and thereby symbolically reproduces social class distinctions (Henry 2005; Holt 1998). In this view, cultural capital emanates from the dominant sectors of society; hence, it is “fostered in an overdetermined manner in

the social milieu of cultural elites” (Holt 1998, 3). Accordingly, individuals can possess more or less cultural capital depending on their family upbringing, their educational experiences, their peer networks, and other sociological factors that exert an enduring influence on their intellectual, social, and aesthetic predispositions and, more generally, the kind of social milieu in which they feel at home (Allen 2002).

This Bourdieuan 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 (Cova, Pace, and Park 2007; Kates 2002; Kozinets 2002; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Thompson and Troester 2002; Thornton 1996). Accordingly, our synthesizing position is to conceptualize the field of consumption in fragmented terms, roughly equivalent to prior conceptualizations of subcultures of consumption. For our purposes, the field of consumption is the preferred conceptual nomenclature because it maintains theoretical continuity with the Bourdieuan interest in the identity value that accrues from the acquisition and possession of (field-dependent) cultural and social capital.

To implement this pluralistic view of the consumption field, we also need to conceptualize cultural capital in a more contextualized fashion, as a field-dependent resource that can be mobilized in particular status games and not in others. While a standard Bourdieuan model of generalized capital is still at play to determine one’s status in the broader societal hierarchy, field-dependent capital is more befitting to understand and explain consumption practices within specific fields of consumption. For example, Thornton (1996) argues that members of rave culture vie for subcultural status by being knowledgeable about cutting-edge trends in electronic music, dance innovations, and fashion styles, or, in other words, accumulating contextualized or field-dependent cultural capital. Kates (2002) adopts a similar perspective to analyze how gay consumers utilize subcultural capital to strategically play with the conventionalized norms of the gay subculture and establish social distinctions.

While consumption fields may have their own indigenous status games and forms of cultural capital, they do not exist as self-contained or autonomous entities. They are embedded in broader sociocultural structures and therefore are interpenetrated by meanings, modes of practices, and power relations linked to class, gender, ethnicity and other social collectivities (Holt 1997). Furthermore, marketplace myths can also create linkages between a given field of consumption and the commercial mainstream of consumer culture (i.e., a complex system constituted by corporate-controlled global media, transnational brands, and large retail chains and whose promotional appeals and commercial offerings are predominantly geared toward middle-class tastes and preferences).

These interlinkages between a consumption field and the commercial mainstream are a function of the ways in which marketplace myths tend to be produced and culturally prop-

agated. Marketers, advertising agencies, branding consultants, and other cultural producers—such as fashion designers, music promoters, and television and film producers—are constantly seeking out fields of consumer culture (e.g., the dirtbag culture of hard-core rock climbers, skateboard culture, hip-hop culture) that they can mine for innovative styles, images, meanings, and ideals (Frank 1997; Holt 2002, 2004). In most cases, these innovative fields of consumption offer alternatives to the everyday routines of middle-class, suburbanite lifestyles. Though the specific iconic forms vary, the marketplace myths that are derived from countercultural or anticonformist fields of consumption commonly espouse ideals of authenticity, freedom from institutional constraints, autonomous self-expressiveness, and rewarding communal affiliations (Holt 2006).

Once a countercultural field of consumption proves to have identity value for a broad swath of consumers, its mythic representations also tend to proliferate across the consumer culture spectrum, as other cultural producers also seek to adapt its resonant iconic representations to their respective competitive niches (Frank 1997; Thompson and Tian 2008). Consequently, a potentially multifaceted consumption field can be reduced to a prototypical constellation (Englis and Solomon 1996) of totemic products, stereotypical attitudes/beliefs, and signatory styles. This mass-mediated process gives rise to iconic cultural types, such as the Preppy, the Yuppie, the Bourgeois-Bohemian, the Skater Boy, the Outlaw Biker, the Urban Gangsta, and the Metrosexual, that embody these prototypical traits and culturally brand the corresponding consumption practices.

This consumer culture propagation can also weaken the marketplace myth's authenticating connection to its generative field of consumption, leaving it vulnerable to charges of merely being another marketer-hyped affectation (Holt 2002) and a bastion of trend-chasing consumerism. At this juncture, the marketplace myth becomes a ripe target for comical lambasting by other cultural producers who always stand ready to cast an ironic light on popular culture icons, such as Levi's 501 "Uncomplicate" viral campaign that parodied metrosexual pretensions and called on men to forgo yoga, lattes, and manicures (McManis 2006). We propose that this stereotypical framing can threaten the identity value of the field-dependent cultural and social capital held by those more deeply vested in the consumption field. Our ensuing analysis details how such vested consumers manage these identity threats by distinguishing their field of consumption from an imposed marketplace myth that has crossed into the realm of cultural caricature.

METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

Our inquiry started with a broad interest in the indie music phenomenon. We established contacts with a local radio DJ, a local music promoter, and a local music critic and snowballed through people in their social network within Madison, Wisconsin, and surrounding areas. The resulting data set consists of 21 phenomenological interviews (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989), which, in aggregate, constitute

over 31 hours of recorded dialogue. All interviews were conducted by the first author. They were taped and transcribed verbatim, resulting in 930 double-spaced pages of text. All names and other identifying information were changed. See table 1 for a summary profile of research participants.

Our interviews began with a wide-ranging examination of our participants' backgrounds and life goals and afterward focused on their consumption experiences in indie music, art, and fashion. While we were not initially interested in the hipster marketplace myth, all participants but one autonomously delved into a critical comparative discourse in which they expressed their self-definitions and experiences using a rhetoric anchored in their perceptions of the hipster. This emergent finding led us to explore the phenomenon of the hipster and uncover its relevance to the indie field of consumption and trace its discursive evolution as a cultural category (see Humphreys [2010] for a similar application). Consequently, we first undertook a genealogical analysis of how the hipster icon had been represented in both news media and influential artistic portrayals such as Mailer's (1957). In the course of this analysis, we collected all articles from the *New York Times* archives (over the period 1923–2009) that used the word "hipster." Across a total of 1,742 articles that included arts reviews, business reports, cultural critiques, and news, we tracked quantifiable shifts, such as yearly changes in word counts. We identified the dates around which these shifts occurred and inquired into the

TABLE 1
PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Education
Amy	24	Designer, booking agent, server	College
Angela	22	Student, barista	College
Betty	22	Customer service agent, radio intern	College
Chris	20	Student, editor, radio DJ	Some college
Darla	23	Graduate student	Graduate school
Debbie	24	Data entry worker	College
Emily	21	Student, radio DJ	Some college
Eric	22	Student, music committee director	Some college
Eva	30	Communications specialist	Graduate school
James	22	Student, musician, DJ	Some college
John	27	Graduate student	Some graduate school
Josh	22	Radio station manager, student	Some college
Kate	19	Student, DJ	Some college
Ken	35	Arts administrator	College
Maria	22	Retail worker, artist	Some college
Peter	23	Student	College
Rose	20	Captioning assistant	Some college
Scarlet	22	Booking agent, retail worker	High school
Tim	28	Barista, artist	High school
Tom	27	Bar manager	College
Victor	22	Student, writer	Some college

historical circumstances that frame these changes, such as the microcontext of the music industry or broader national discourse. We also plumbed these texts for the meanings they projected onto the hipster icon and the consumption fields that were portrayed as hipsters' cultural epicenters—in particular, indie music and fashion. At this stage, we gave particular attention to the semantic shifts in the meaning systems that surrounded the characterization of the hipster, as we will elaborate on in the following section. In keeping with the conventions of hermeneutic research (Thompson 1997), we then iterated back to the individual interviews and further interpreted these consumer narratives in reference to the historically (and commercially) established meaning systems that the hipster myth has imposed over the indie field. Our final interpretation is formulated as a result of multiple iterations between individual interviews and the entire data set, including our historical discourse analysis.

HOW INDIE BECAME CULTURALLY BRANDED BY THE HIPSTER MARKETPLACE MYTH

Historically, the hipster has been associated with cultural practices that are fundamentally at odds with the dominant norms of American culture (Frank 1997). While Leland (2005) argues that the notion of hip goes back to the private language of the slaves in seventeenth-century plantations, the hipster as a mythic identity is first depicted in a pamphlet named *A Hepster's Dictionary* (Calloway 1938), which was described as a glossary of the insider language of the Harlem musicians, performers, and other “hep cats” who were innovators and insiders in the music scene. Over time, the hep cat appellation morphed into the hipster, which invoked a broader aesthetic scope and also acquired a connotation of worldly sophistication mixed with a predilection for illicit pleasures (MacAdams 2001).

Initially, hip was a category exclusive to urban black culture. Norman Mailer's famous essay “The White Negro” (1957) reframed the hipster discourse in a form that made it far more relevant to the sociocultural position of white middle-class men. Mailer canonized urban black culture as a beacon of authenticity that could help guide white middle-class men out of their suburbanized, conformist, organization-man lifestyles. While Mailer's essay has been criticized as an aesthetic idealization that had only a tenuous connection to the sociocultural conditions being portrayed (Shoemaker 1991), this shortcoming did not prevent his depiction of the hipster from becoming an archetypal narrative, deeply embedded in American popular memory. The most significant purveyors of this myth were the Beat Generation writers, such as Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, and the broader swath of younger anticonformists who gravitated toward the Beat culture and its romanticized and aestheticized vision of urban hipness (Savran 1998).

After the Beat movement dissipated, the hipster narrative similarly faded from cultural prominence. From 1970s to

mid-1990s, people continued to derive identity value from competing countercultural myths like the hippie, the punk, the mod, and grunge, while hipster remained a fairly inconspicuous term used for literary references to Mailer's essay, or as a descriptive word for bohemians living on the societal margins. This declining cultural relevance is also reflected by the volume of the news media discourse on the topic of hipsters. Throughout the 1970s, references to hipsters were very sporadic and mostly related to musicians, artists, and the bohemian counterculture. In the decade between 1980 and 1990, the *New York Times* only had 72 articles in total that made reference to hipsters. During the 1990s, however, references began to increase, with a dramatic spike in 1994. Between 2000 and 2009, *New York Times* articles referencing hipsters would mushroom to 1,195, with another sharp spike in 2003. This dramatic rise in news media attention also corresponded to a significant transformation in the cultural meanings conveyed by the hipster myth. So what happened between 1994 and 2003?

Marketplace Appropriation of the Hipster

On August 8, 1994, the cover story of *Time* made declarations like “Everybody's hip” and “Hipness is bigger than General Motors” (Lacayo 1994, 48). Suddenly, a mainstream cultural authority was making a connection between countercultural consumerism and the largely dormant hipster myth. The article nostalgically celebrated the Beat Generation as the embodiment of the hipster movements' iconoclastic, anticonformist spirit; it criticized the commercial mainstreaming of hipness by baby boomer consumers who seek to defy their mortality; and it posed the question that would become central in subsequent cultural dialogues about hipness: “If everyone is hip . . . is anyone hip?” By the end of the 1990s, leading business media such as *Brandweek*, *Fortune*, and the *Wall Street Journal* were all discussing the hipster as a commercially significant cultural category (Kinsella 1999; Lee 1996; Miller 1996; Munk 1999; Pope 1998). Yet little agreement existed on just what the hipster label actually signified, beyond being a hot marketing topic.

While a consensus definition may have been lacking, this new cultural construction of the hipster was clearly no longer located at the radical fringe of society. The emerging spate of articles that referred to hipsters used this cultural classification as a synonym for fashionable counterculture, largely denuded of any connotations of social protest or deviance. Over the next decade, the hipster myth became more tightly coupled to the indie movement in music, arts, and fashion. As it turned out, the hipster labeling of indie helped solidify the meaning of this emergent field of consumption and, particularly, its symbolic contrast to the commercial mainstream. In a dialectical fashion, indie provided a cultural reference point that helped marketers (and consumer culture in general) clarify the hipster icon by objectifying it through concrete consumption practices.

Hipster Becomes a Cultural Brand for Indie

Independent modes of music production and distribution can be traced back to early blues and jazz labels, which built their business by catering to avant-garde tastes and tapping into the creative talent pool of African American culture. During the 1950s and 1960s, independent music labels harmoniously coexisted with those that were owned by larger corporations; they accounted for roughly half of overall national album sales and maintained a relatively high degree of autonomy while still receiving financial assistance from the major labels (Reynolds 2005). During the 1970s, this symbiotic arrangement began to break down as indie label stakeholders complained about the loss of artistic freedom and pressures for commercial accessibility emanating from the influence of the larger corporate labels. In response, indie labels linked to the insurgent punk rock movement made a strategic decision to operate outside of this corporate subsidy system. After the demise of punk, this network of independent labels remained and continued to promote forms of music that diverged, often aggressively so, from the mainstream (Top 40) genres distributed by major corporate labels. Nonetheless, indie distributors still functioned as a de facto “farm system for majors” (Reynolds 2005, 391) by discovering and cultivating new talent whose innovative sounds would prove to have broader commercial appeal.

By the mid-1990s, the independent music scenes in North America and Europe were thriving and cycling through microgenres, such as shoegaze, slowcore, and psychobilly, at an exceedingly rapid rate. Around this time, music critics began to associate the aficionados of indie music with the hipster icon, primarily in reference to their distaste for mainstream middlebrow commercial culture (Christgau 1996). This connection between the hipster myth and the indie field of consumption became more codified and culturally established as the indie marketplace itself matured. Pitchfork Media, an important arbiter of indie taste (Freedom du Lac 2006), was established in 1996 as a webzine aiming to redress the paucity of indie coverage by the mainstream music media (Itzkoff 2006). By 2003, it reached a sufficient critical mass to warrant a major story in *Newsweek* (Begun 2003). At the same time, niche lifestyle media like *Arthur*, *Vice*, *Spin*, and *Bust*, which already prominently featured indie cultural products, began attracting advertisements from small brands and DIY collectives. American Apparel, founded in 1997, established exclusive contracts with record labels like Barsuk, Merge, and Sub Pop for merchandising. Urban Outfitters partnered with Insound, the indie music retailer, to craft a monthly best-of mix record to be sold at Urban Outfitters. These structural linkages between various indie brands and consumption domains were further underscored by the labeling of the corresponding lifestyle practices as “hipster” by cultural producers and pop culture critics (Reynolds 2007).

From Cultural Icon to Cultural Caricature

As the hipster became more visible in the American public sphere, parodies and critiques of the hipster icon emerged as a result of reflexive public engagement with the narrative. In 2003, two books mocking the hipster culture were published. Aiello's (2003) *Field Guide to the Urban Hipster* provided a tongue-in-cheek taxonomy of hipsters' quintessential cultural outlooks, interpersonal demeanor, tastes, and fashion sensibilities. An even more popular satire, *The Hipster Handbook* (Lanham, Nicely, and Bechtel 2003), lampooned hipsters while ostensibly teaching its readers the cultural and aesthetic rules for performing this cultural identity. The popularity of these two books ignited an intense cultural debate on the topic, which manifested itself in Web sites dedicated to the phenomenon (e.g., <http://www.hipstersareannoying.com>, <http://www.diehipster.com>, <http://www.latfh.com>); a vast number of blog entries, cartoons, and bulletin board discussions; and a satirical “Hipster Bingo” (<http://www.catbirdseat.org/catbirdseat/bingo.html>) game that became a viral sensation, earning recognition in *USA Today*'s “Hot Sites.” In a high-profile cover story, *Adbusters* upped the critical ante by declaring hipsters to be “the end of Western civilization—a culture so detached and disconnected that it has stopped giving birth to anything new” (Haddow 2008). This derisive trend gained further momentum through a gamut of poison-pen op-eds by arts and fashion critics who condemned hipsters as a bourgeois affectation that, among other presumed inequities, “fetishizes the authentic and regurgitates it with a winking inauthenticity” (Lorentzen 2007).

While the 1950s hipster had been represented as a countercultural iconoclast who defied the consumerist norms of middle-class culture, the millennial hipster increasingly came to be represented as an überconsumer of trends and as a new, and rather gullible, target market (Baar 2003; Binkley 2005; Hempel 2006; Jeffers 2003; McLaughlin 2003; Welsh 2001) that consumes cool rather than creating it (Haddow 2008). *The Hipster Handbook* is, in fact, a 169-page catalog of possessions, styles, and tastes that schematizes this consumption. Hipster Bingo lists Pabst Blue Ribbon, Puma, Miller High Life, and the trucker hat as some of the signs by which to identify hipsters. Last but not least, *The Last of the Hipsters*—a viral video that has received more than a million hits on YouTube—portrays three hipsters who are survivors of a nuclear holocaust but who remain obsessed with arcane pop-culture trivia, ironic self-presentation, and the status value of having the latest-generation iPod.

As these satirical and critical depictions reached a cultural tipping point, their negative connotations also filtered into branding and advertising strategies that drew from the hipster myth. For example, Apple's high-profile “I'm a Mac and I'm a PC” advertisements were quickly and widely read as a competitive repartee between the uncool businessman nerd and a prototypical culture-savvy hipster (Stevenson 2006). Soon, consumer-generated send-ups of this campaign were being posted on YouTube and other social media sites,

generating considerable traffic. In these ad parodies, the Apple hipster was portrayed as superficial, narcissistic, pre-ententious, and indolent, whereas the PC nerd represented a paragon of commonsense virtue, maturity, industriousness, and imperviousness to faddishness.

This mythological branding of the indie consumption field provides the contextual backdrop for our analysis of consumers who experience this marketplace myth as a contestable and undesired imposition on their indie-oriented interests, activities, identities, and attained status positions in the field. In the following sections, we first discuss the different social paths that led consumers to make investments in the indie field of consumption. These paths of entry and investment are notable because they are largely devoid of mythic/therapeutic motivations that are assumed by the existing identity-myth literature. Next, we explicate the subsequent demythologizing practices that indie consumers use to protect the identity value of their field-dependent cultural and social capital from what they deem to be a devaluing marketplace myth.

HOW VESTED CONSUMERS DEMYTHOLOGIZE THEIR FIELD OF CONSUMPTION

Making Identity Investments in the Field

The indie field is constituted by a network of clubs, music stores, fashion stores, third-place hangouts, media, and intersecting social networks. These interlinkages are quite important for understanding how individuals become vested in the field. For example, a consumer may enter into one node in the field, such as a club or a music store, through a social acquaintance or serendipity, perhaps without being explicitly aware that he/she is in the broader indie field. This initial contact point provides opportunities to further develop cultural knowledge and social connections that can easily lead a consumer into other nodes in the indie field. Through these explorations, consumers can steadily increase their personal investments in this field of consumption and, reciprocally, their overall stock of field-dependent cultural and social capital.

In the indie field, cultural capital can take a variety of embodied forms, such as a deep understanding of indie cultural products (e.g., music, fashion, media) and their histories; the ability to judge and critique indie culture in relation to the appropriate aesthetic ideals; fluency in the indie lexicon; and, perhaps in the most embodied sense, a natural feel for the indie status game in terms of comportment and improvised interactions. Indie cultural capital can also take institutional forms, such as having credentials of being a radio host or music critic, having an editorial position at a music magazine, and other institutionally awarded titles within the consumption field that generate mutual recognition among participants of the field. Finally, indie cultural capital can also be objectified in record, book, and film collections and in esoteric fashion goods that innovatively

express the indie tastes, as well as one's own cultural and artistic creations.

Field-dependent social capital refers to weak- and strong-tie social connections that consumers can use to access resources available in the indie field. Some examples of resources gained through social capital include positions on music and film committees (an institutionalized form of capital); employment opportunities at indie service and retail institutions; and, perhaps most commonly, the feelings of social support, belongingness, and camaraderie afforded by sharing common aesthetic interests and tastes. Like cultural capital, social capital is not spent in the sense of being exhausted of value once it is leveraged to gain economic or cultural capital. Each conversion can also provide opportunities for increasing the overall volume of social capital. For example, a consumer may use his/her social connection to gain employment in a sector of the indie field and then, through the course of doing the job, further expand his/her social network. As consumers' social networks expand, they also become more vested in the field of consumption, which supports their social capital.

Consumers' initial connection points and embodied affinities can then lead to a series of incremental investments as they continue to explore the indie field. Debbie, for example, began to explore the indie field in search of alternatives to mainstream commercial radio. After gradually acquiring indie cultural capital, she used this knowledge and authority to secure a position in local radio, which in turn rewarded her with social capital that she very much coveted:

I was really into music in high school, but I really just didn't know where to find it; like the newer stuff. I really just hated the radio. I thought it was awful, and I just really didn't know where to find it, and then when I ended up going to [small town university]. I was involved with their college radio station, and that's when I came to [larger university].

Interviewer: So how did you end up working for the radio?

It was just something I was very interested in. I transferred here, and I transferred to an antisocial dorm, so I had to make friends. I was gonna go crazy because no one left the doors open; no one wanted to make friends, and I'm like, I moved here, and I don't know anybody, so I just got involved with the radio station.

A number of participants describe following a serendipitous path of discoveries and social connections, which shaped their indie tastes and identifications. In this spirit, Maria describes how a mixtape made by her older sister dramatically altered her musical tastes and started her journey into the indie field of consumption:

My older sister worked at a radio station. When I was maybe 15 or 16 years old, she made me this mixtape. I associate it with big changes in my life. So all the songs that are on that are all songs that I totally love now. There are a lot of bands that sound similar to the bands

that's on this one tape. I guess that was probably the big change where I stopped listening to pop radio and started listening to that kind of music. Like *Le Tigre*, *Sleater-Kinney*, *Bikini Kill*. There are a bunch of those. Then there's *Elliott Smith*, *Built to Spill*, *Modest Mouse*. Some electronic stuff's on there, too. So it was just kind of an indie rock introduction.

In the following vignette, Amy offers a crystallizing reflection on how the process of forging more and more social connections to other indie consumers generates feelings of self-discovery, personal enrichment, and identity investment in a field of consumption that feels increasingly like her cultural home:

I guess I started getting into underground music when I was about 16. That was when I met a couple of friends online and we started exchanging mixtapes. I thought it was a great way of learning new music. It was just great exposure at [the] time too. I was friends with people who were a couple of thousand miles away and we'll just mail each other tapes back and forth. This also got me into the habit of just sampling other bands because I really like the mixes. Then I got a job at *Borders* bookstore when I was 18 and we actually had a lot of free promos for music. So I started picking up a lot of compilations and just read a lot of music magazines and kind of got familiar with different names and started looking at different bands and became very interested in this underground music scene because it was so different from the music that you'd hear from any other major radio station. I was just kind of exposing myself to new music. I also got into the habit of going to public libraries and checking [out] a lot of random CDs; just check out music, 'cause it was free and it is there. So I would say that also helped me to gain exposure to different music and I still kind of do that. In my college years I got a lot of exposure through booking bands. I was on the music committee for three years. Bands, basically from all over the U.S. and even some international bands, would send us press kits with their music, trying to promote their band, trying to get shows at the union. So that was great exposure for me because people were sending music left and right, and I didn't even have to burn any music online. People were just giving me this free music. So, that was another way of getting to know more underground bands as well. And I kind of, I feel like the [indie] world is kind of small. Once you start with a band or two, they refer you to a couple of different bands and then they go on tours and, you know, pretty soon you just know everybody in the industry.

Pursuing her nascent interest in alternative music, Amy discovered a pathway into the ready-made social network offered by the indie field. As she gradually cultivated her indie tastes, these social connections (and her corresponding field-dependent cultural capital) became increasingly central to her identity. Amy's passage also demonstrates that social capital and field-dependent cultural capital can become in-

tertwined in ways that amplify their respective identity values. Amy's accumulated social capital makes a diverse array of tape mixes available to her, which in turn builds her knowledge about a broad swath of indie bands, as well as calibrates her tastes to those of others in the consumption field. Amy's gift economy exchanges not only function to enhance feelings of reciprocal obligation and personal commitment to a social network but also contribute to her stock of field-dependent cultural capital, which she can in turn leverage to attain higher positions of status within the field. Continuing this upward-ratcheting cycle of identity investments and commitments, her enhanced status position and indie-specific credentials also create opportunities for further broadening her social connections within the field and gaining access to still more sources of cultural capital.

As evinced by the preceding consumer narratives, consumers gain feelings of expertise and enhanced social status as they acquire more field-dependent capital. Through these investments in the field, they also become more secure in their cultivated indie tastes and, by implication, more wedded to their aesthetic preferences. In this process, they also forge weak and sometimes strong social ties (Granovetter 1983) to other consumers in the field who not only share their aesthetic tastes but also continuously validate the status value of their capital. Importantly, these investments are not just abstract resources that are held at a distance. To be employed, these identity resources have to be internalized as naturalized tastes, embodied predilections, and "fits-like-a-glove" (Allen 2002) affinities that allow for natural social improvisations and aesthetic judgments (Bourdieu 1984). For indie consumers, these internalized forms of capital also produce varying degrees of discomfort and distaste to the prospect of switching to other consumption fields that are oriented toward different aesthetics.

Consumers' embodied preferences, taste-based switching aversions, and affectively charged social ties to the indie field create strong experiential motivations to protect their identity investments in the field even without making conscious/rational calculations about the value of their capital. When a marketplace myth transforms a field of consumption into a target of parody and ridiculing clichés, vested consumers have internalized potent sociocultural and experiential barriers to exit and, by implication, emotional imperatives to defend the value of their field-dependent social and cultural capital. Toward this end, the indie consumers in our study have developed strategies for creating and reinforcing symbolic boundaries between their identity-defining consumption practices and the devaluing hipster myth.

Practices for Demythologizing the Indie Field of Consumption

We define demythologization practices as a nexus of activities, interpretive strategies (and concomitant identity narratives) that consumers use to disentangle and distinguish their investments in a field of consumption from a devaluing marketplace myth. For our participants, the hipster myth is

the trivializing stereotype that threatens the value of their identity investments in the indie field of consumption. To defend the value of their field-dependent capital from these threats, our participants rely on three forms of demythologizing practices, which we detail in the following sections.

Aesthetic Discrimination. Our participants use this practice to parse out subtle but consequential points of distinction between their indie-oriented consumption practices and the product and brand constellations that have been subsumed within the hipster marketplace myth. For those who are highly vested in the field of indie consumption, aesthetic discrimination helps manage specific anxieties and tensions that are posed by their general resemblance to many aspects of the commercially diffused hipster icon. Their rhetorical logic echoes Bourdieu's (1984, 6) famed principle of distinction—"Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make"—and the related sociological tenet that cultural capital is revealed by the way objects are consumed, rather than the essential properties of objects themselves (Holt 1998). Our participants classify those who "accuse" them of being hipsters as uninformed outsiders who lack the sophistication needed to discriminate between the superficial and emulative orientations of hipsters and those who consume the indie field with a more self-directed and refined aesthetic sensibility. Accordingly, indie consumers can disavow hipster attributions while consuming many of the same fashion styles (and even frequenting the same stores) that are commonly interpreted as being part and parcel of the commercially propagated hipster identity:

Interviewer: You said somebody called you a hipster. Do you have any idea why?

Scarlet: Yeah, because I'm so interested in fashion, a lot of the time what I'm wearing may be trendy. I'm not gonna lie, I shop at Urban [Outfitters] sometimes, only when it's on sale of course. I like jeans, but I don't necessarily buy the jeans that are popular. I like doing a lot of the things that are the hipster thing to do, but I do them because I like to do them, not because they're the cool thing to do. And because I am immersed in the social scene where there are a lot of hipsters, people mistake me for being one of them.

Even when consuming products and brands that are exemplary symbols of the hipster icon, our participants attribute these correspondences to superficial similarities that reveal nothing of consequence about the aesthetic values they are enacting or their underlying motivations. In the case of the iconic hipster brand, Urban Outfitters, our participants define nuanced (and identity-enhancing) distinctions between aspects of the brand that convey commercialized meanings and those that express redeeming aesthetic values, which presumably only legitimate indie consumers can discern:

Amy: I think they [Urban Outfitters] are really on when it

comes to the designers that they work with. The bad and trendy music that they play in the store aside and the stereotypical clients that you see there aside, when I walk into that store, there are so many things that appeal to me. The main reason that I started working there [was] because I kind of wanted my foot in the door. Maybe I can design for them someday, or you work with the company at some level, and in order to do that I needed to start as a sales associate. . . . I hated being in that environment and I was constantly surrounded by people were on [a] constant quest of being cool. I think that if you talk to people who are truly doing their own thing, they don't like Urban Outfitters although there are so many people who still shop there because they do have really smart designs.

In a similar rhetorical move, Eva critically dissects Apple's hipster brand image, noting how this product marks their target segment as mere trend followers, even though she is an avid user of the brand's signature hipster product, the iPod:

Eva: Well, the whole Apple marketing scheme for the iPod; that's totally selling to hipsters. It's totally selling to a kid who can afford to buy a \$400 device to listen to music on and walk down the street, and it's all about the dancing and what cute outfit they're wearing, and that's what their ads were like, and that's totally who that was marketed to. I mean, I have one too, but you have the little white earpod and you're wearing certain shoes and a certain coat, and I'm like, yeah, you're one, a hipster.

Aesthetic discrimination is most commonly employed by those participants who have acquired higher status in the field. For example, Scarlet and Amy both possess cultural authority—owing to their expert forms of cultural capital and occupational positions in the indie music scene—to differentiate the meanings of their legitimate consumption styles from the popularized and commercialized styles of the hipster. In their narratives, they repeatedly attest that they are "doing their own thing" and displaying a cultivated taste for these specific consumption practices rather than following a commercialized lifestyle model. They deem hipsters to be emulating, in an uncreative formulaic manner, their "natural facility" (Bourdieu 1984, 255) for appreciating the right clothing, the right music, and other signifying consumption practices: hipsters do not possess legitimate indie tastes but aspire only to be trendy and cool. Rather than effecting an outright rejection of indie's commercial co-optation, these consumers use bastions of commercialized indie culture, such as Urban Outfitters, as a paradoxical resource for displaying their discerning tastes. By gleaning aesthetically meritorious forms of indie culture from the mainstream marketplace, these consumers leverage their field-dependent cultural capital in ways that distinguish them from stereotypical hipsters and also from indie consumers who have less status in the consumption field and hence lack the cultural license to flaunt the symbolic boundary between legitimate and illegitimate expressions of indie culture.

Symbolic Demarcation. Indie consumers who employ the strategy of aesthetic discrimination tend to have an intellectual and embodied (or practical) command of indie culture and are socially recognized as people who are in the know when it comes to matters of indie tastes. Owing to their high status position in the field, these consumers have a cultural authority to dismiss any resemblances between their consumption practices and the hipster icon as irrelevant trivialities or as an ironic comment on its corporate contrivances. In contrast, our participants who are not as well established in indie social networks or not as confident in their indie tastes do not have a cultural license to act with this same sense of impunity toward the negative connotations of the hipster marketplace myth. Rather, they must grapple with the discomfiting prospect that they could, at any time, mirror the hipster caricature through an inadvertent miscue in their expression of indie tastes. Such gaffes could potentially jeopardize their limited stock of cultural and social capital within the field. However, the more pressing identity issue for these consumers emanates from their awareness that they occupy a transitional, betwixt and between position in the indie field. More vested in the field than outsiders but not yet recognized as insiders, these consumers experience subtle social imperatives to thoroughly insulate their identities from potentially discrediting similarities to the hipster icon. They perform this legitimating identity work by forging a symbolic distinction to the “scenester”:

Emily: My best friend graduated college last May, and everyone gave her funny gifts. I gave her a pair of leg warmers that I knit, and another friend of ours gave her *The Hipster Handbook*. We went to a concert in Chicago, and on the way there I was reading the book out loud to her, and we were talking about it, and we were just like, “These aren’t really hipsters. These are scenesters that they’re talking about.”

Through this demarcation, these consumers project the negative connotations of the hipster marketplace myth onto the scenester and, in the process, legitimate their position within the indie field. They portray scenesters as wannabe consumers who purchase a prepackaged, commercialized hipster ensemble rather than immersing themselves in a do-it-yourself process of aesthetic exploration and discovery:

Betty: A hipster is somebody who cares about the music and is doing it because they like the music. They’re really cool looking, and I guess they shop thrift stores and they have that sort of ethic. They’re “do it yourself,” and very heavily invested in the indie music scene. A scenester is somebody who does it for fashion and gets their clothes like at, like, Urban Outfitters and pays \$200 for a pair of jeans, which I think is ridiculous; but that’s just me.

These narratives solidify a contrast between legitimate indie consumers who are intrinsically interested in indie culture (and in the process of building their field-dependent capital) and those who simply want to be part of a fashionable scene; a cultural distinction whose logic is analogous to that of locals who live (and produce) a culture and tourists

who purchase kitschy mementos and restrict their experiences to commercialized sites (MacCannell 1989). This second strategy of demythologizing also denudes the hipster category of its commodified, superficial, and inauthentic associations. When forging these identity contrasts to scenesters, indie consumers also revive the hipsters’ historical ties to countercultural creativity and coolness. For example, Betty idealizes the hipsters by stating that they “have that essence to define what’s cool.” Similarly, James discusses the positive attribution he draws when he is labeled as a hipster:

In some ways it’s sort of a compliment. I have been searching for an identity since I was a little kid. And to be associated with something that has to do with culture and, and being in the know about things and maybe having a bit of an edge about you, looking at things critically, society, things like that, being somewhat intellectual. I don’t think those are really bad things.

Indie consumers who employ a symbolic demarcation strategy do draw some identity value from the countercultural legacy that has been commercially appropriated by the hipster myth. In contrast to conventional explanations of consumer identity work, which again assume that the identity myth is the source of attraction, these participants first became vested in the field of consumption and then have to manage a cultural label they felt was being imposed on their aesthetic interests. Lacking the cultural authority to directly dissociate from the myth, they resort to transposing undesirable meanings into a new category (i.e., the scenester) and, in turn, invoke the more archaic and commercially displaced meanings of the hipster myth (and its Beat Generation sensibility) as a distinction-enhancing resource.

Proclaiming (Mythologized) Consumer Sovereignty. Through this strategy, a subset of our participants culturally reframe their interests in the indie field by invoking an alternative system of mythic meanings. Holt (2002, 76–78) highlighted one manifestation of this alternative marketplace myth in his analysis of “Don,” a key informant who envisioned himself as a sovereign consumer who resisted “marketing’s cultural authority” (Holt 2002, 78) by assiduously sifting through the plenitude of marketplace offerings. While defiantly screening out all marketplace resources and appeals that do not fit in his identity projects, Don became an ardent and passionate consumer for those goods that serve his self-chosen identity projects. According to Holt (2002), this approach to consumer sovereignty paradoxically leads consumers to seek autonomy from the influence of marketing and the logic of commodity capitalism by construing their identities in highly commodified terms. Similarly, Thompson and Haytko (1997) discuss consumers who promulgate their autonomy from the dictates of the fashion system by creatively poaching from an eclectic array of fashionable brands and fashion styles. For these fashion bricoleurs to enact these practices of sovereignty, however, they also have to cultivate a keen understanding of prevailing fashion trends and closely monitor the ever-shifting meanings of fashion

brands: a paradoxical dynamic also documented by Murray (2002).

From our standpoint, these three prior studies are tapping into a more general marketplace myth of the sovereign consumer, which ideologically privileges consumer choice and volition over the institutional influences that the marketplace (via corporate-controlled branding, retailing, and advertising strategies) exerts on consumer choice. However, this myth can also be placed into the service of other more particularistic and field-dependent identity projects. For our subset of indie consumers, they invoke the myth of consumer sovereignty not to declare their autonomy from the influences of marketing or the fashion system *per se*, but instead to declare that their investments in the indie field are merely one facet of their syncretic identity projects and, hence, to insulate their field-dependent capital from devaluating associations with stereotypical hipsters.

Rather than denigrating hipsters as poseurs who lack legitimating credentials (as in the aesthetic discrimination practice), these postmodern poachers deem “hipsters” (in the pejorative sense) to be those whose identities are completely subsumed to a parochial set of aesthetic interests:

Tom: Do I self-identify as one [a hipster]? No, because, like, I think I’m just a little more anachronistic. I’m not as with it as a lot of people are. I don’t necessarily know every single weird obscure band. I don’t necessarily want to. But I mean, yeah, who do I hang out with? I hang out with like a bunch of tattooed indie dorks. So, yeah, I guess I am but I wouldn’t self-identify, I think. I’d listen to stuff that’s outside the mainstream or it’s like I dress weird compared to the majority of the population. I just try not to think about it too much. The minute you start identifying with a subculture—and that’s probably where a lot of the backlash comes from—you kind of lose individuality, surrender part of your identity, and we don’t wanna do that. And I try not to do that. Music is music and I feel like it should be judged on its merits. Like, I listen to Lynyrd Skynyrd unapologetically. I [expletive deleted] love Skynyrd!

In differentiating themselves from the hipster, these participants also de-emphasize the overall significance of their investments in the indie field. Accordingly, they also envision their aesthetic interests as a moving target that at some point could gravitate away from the indie field altogether:

Chris: What else do I do? Let’s see . . . well, I have an emerging interest in film too. I think that’s not at all uncommon for indie music, ‘cause just as the, a lot of the kids that have all this indie music tastes have a lot of indie film taste too. Once again it’s kind of a style thing too. And maybe rather than calling it indie film you might call art film. I think it goes hand in hand. A lot of the same kids that read Pitchfork and listen to all these indie bands also go to the art house for their movies; and once again I don’t bother trying to limit myself to the art house, just like I don’t limit myself to indie music. I think these communities breed things where it’s just

like, well, it’s cool to look like this; but from my perspective this isn’t actually that good.

Those using this strategy portray themselves as being immune from the negative connotations of the hipster stereotype because their cultural interests and social spheres are multidimensional. These participants do not hesitate to criticize others in their social circle for being too sequestered in the indie field and, hence, demonstrating the provincialism associated with the hipster stereotype:

Peter: Once again I feel like there’s a gravity pull, coming around with a distinct style. I’m like, dude, get outside for a while, get out of the [indie coffee shop] for a while. I feel like I can learn just as much going to a frat party as I can by going to the indie coffee shop. I feel like they’re both essential as sort of surroundings. . . . If you’re hanging around with these indie kids, in a sense I feel I can learn and observe things from these more frat mainstream kids. That kind of deal. I just think they shouldn’t be limiting yourself to one side or the other. I guess that’s why I dress plain, I can easily go one way or the other.

Throughout our interview, Peter derided the cultish nature of the “indie kids” with whom he routinely interacts. To avoid falling into the gravity pull of the indie scene (a metaphor that invokes the image of a social black hole), Peter dresses in a manner that affords a higher degree of social flexibility and facilitates his quest to poach identity resources from other social spheres—including the fraternity scene, which generally is regarded in the indie field as a space that exemplifies oppositional values and tastes.

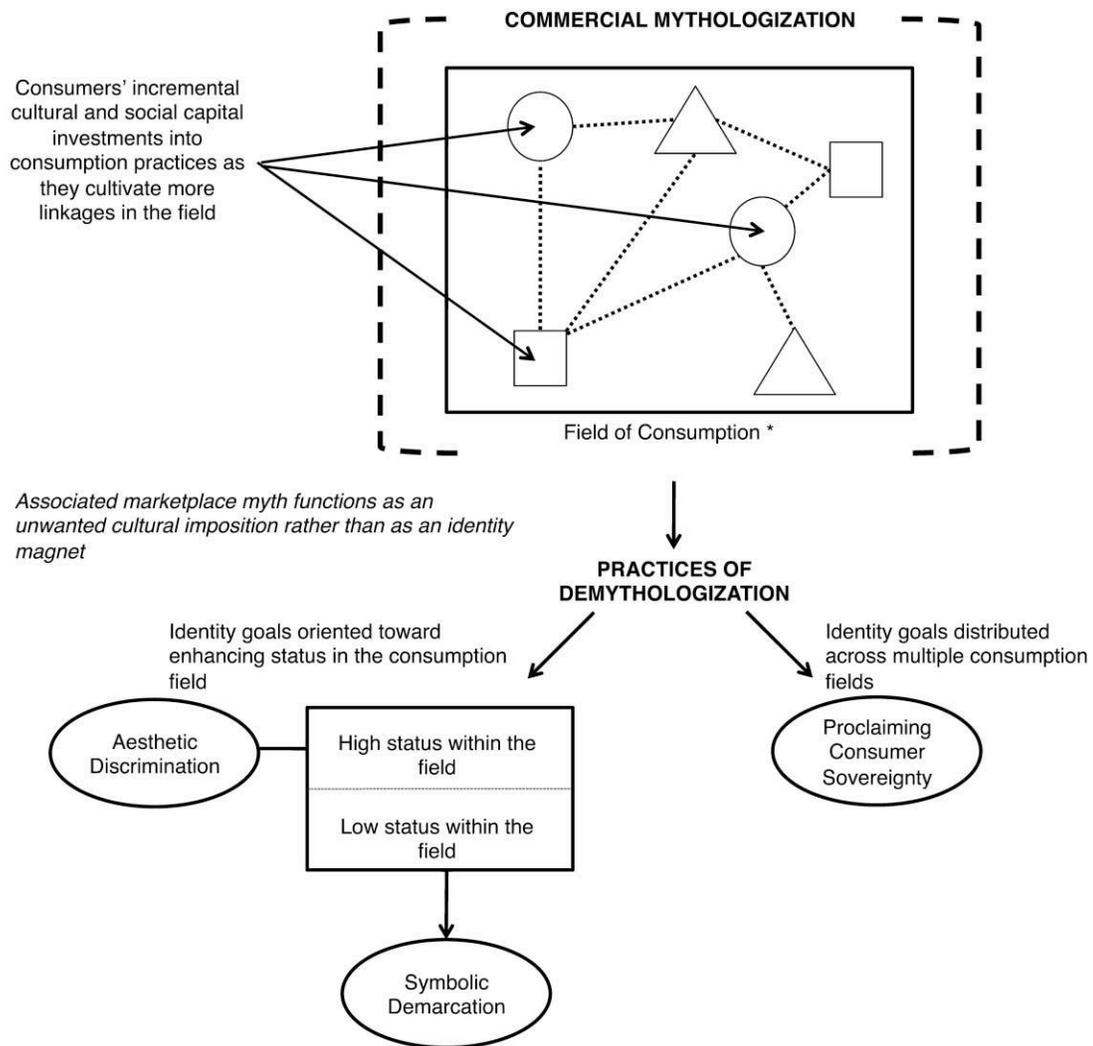
While being an active and knowledgeable consumer of indie, Chris views the status games that transpire in this field of consumption with a bemused and reflexive detachment. He takes both as a point of pride and personal distinction that he can participate in the indie field without it colonizing his identity. From his standpoint, the hipster icon is not so much an irrelevant marketplace myth as it is a cautionary tale of being consumed by an arcane and socially confining status system:

Chris: There are probably even indie-approved beverages, like Pabst Blue Ribbon. That’s the hipster beer. There’s that with everything. It’s exhausting, absolutely exhausting. And that’s why I don’t try to keep up with it, ‘cause I’d waste my whole life trying to keep up with it. If I was sitting here right now, and I had girls’ jeans on, and a funky haircut, and was drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon all the time, and getting import copies of Swedish psychobilly folk noise pop, whatever the hell, and reading David Sedaris, and watching obscure samurai-trash-cult movies. If I was going for this just way obscure, cooler than you in every possible conceivable way thing, I just wouldn’t really feel like myself anymore. I’d just feel like this imagined cultural ideal. I wouldn’t even feel like a real person anymore, you know what I mean?

As evinced by Chris’s narrative, indie consumers’ proclamations of consumer sovereignty are often expressed with a detailed knowledge of the very hipster trends that are being

FIGURE 1

HOW CONSUMERS PROTECT THEIR FIELD-DEPENDENT CAPITAL THROUGH DEMYTHOLOGIZING PRACTICES



* The different geometric shapes designate different interlinked consumption sites that are situated in the indie field (i.e., clubs, music stores, bookstores, coffee shops, fashion boutiques, etc.).

disavowed. Through this paradoxical utilization of their field-dependent cultural capital, these consumers venerate their indie consumption practices as authentic reflections of their self-directed interests and tastes while casting aside the disauthenticating cultural meanings that have emerged from the mass commercialization of indie—and that are embodied in the pejorative and stereotypical image of the status-chasing hipster.

DISCUSSION

Consumer researchers have commonly assumed that individuals are drawn to a consumption practice or iconic brand

because its associated marketplace myth helps them resolve salient sociocultural contradictions and/or incorporate abstract cultural ideals into their identity projects (Diamond et al. 2009; Holt 2002, 2006; Kozinets 2001; Muniz and Schau 2005; Thompson 2004). This theoretical orientation is also prone to overstating the centrality of marketplace myths in consumers' identity projects while glossing over sociocultural dynamics (such as status games and the acquisition of social and cultural capital) that can also mobilize consumers to make identity investments in a field of consumption and sustain continued commitment to its social and cultural networks.

As illustrated in figure 1, our participants' indie con-

sumption practices and identifications were sparked by a mix of serendipitous discoveries, social connections, and “fits-like-a-glove” (Allen 2002) aesthetic responses rather than by a singular, magnetlike attraction to a resonant identity myth. Over time, they gradually became vested in the indie field through their emotional captivations with the cultural ambience of indie spaces; the aesthetic pleasure offered by various aspects of indie culture (with music perhaps being the most common enticement); friendships and social connections gained through their participation in the indie field; and, not to be overlooked, the feelings of self-enrichment and status gains that accrue from building a stock of cultural capital that is valued in the consumption field and that is understood as the cultivation of highly refined aesthetic tastes. Once vested in the indie field, these consumers become reflexively aware of the hipster marketplace myth that has been culturally (and commercially) imposed on their identity practices. Rather than functioning as a source of attraction, indie consumers view this marketplace myth as a caricature of their aesthetic tastes, which threatens the value of their field-dependent capital. They employ demythologizing practices to insulate the field of indie consumption from the stigmatizing encroachments of the hipster myth and, in so doing, protect their field-dependent capital from cultural devaluation.

Consumers’ respective status positions in the indie consumption field also seem to exert a systemic influence on the specific demythologizing practices that they employ. Higher-status indie consumers (i.e., those with greater volumes of field-dependent social and cultural capital) are most likely to employ an aesthetic discrimination strategy. Indie consumers who are still in the process of acquiring the capital needed to elevate their status position are most likely to rely on the strategy of symbolic demarcation. Finally, the consumers most likely to employ our third strategy—proclaiming (mythologized) consumer sovereignty—are in the process of diversifying their identity portfolios by building social and cultural capital in more than one field of consumption. While indie remains the consumption field in which they have the most significant identity investments, their indie capital has been recruited into a heterogeneous identity project that is not easily reducible to the hipster marketplace myth and that supports their pejorative reinterpretations of hipsters as parochial consumers.

By analyzing the identity investments made by indie consumers, we extend sociologically oriented consumer research that has detailed the influences that cultural capital exerts on consumers’ choices, tastes, and identity practices (Allen 2002; Henry 2005; Holt 1997, 1998). Drawing from Bourdieu (1984, 1990), these studies have primarily focused on the way in which consumers’ available stocks of cultural capital mirror their socioeconomic position. From this standpoint, consumption is an important means of social reproduction that helps maintain and reinforce existing social hierarchies (Holt 1998; Üstüner and Holt 2007). This theoretical conclusion, however, applies to generalized forms of cultural capital—that is, those forms that have currency

in broader socioeconomic status competitions whose terms tend to be set by the dominant classes (Bourdieu 1984). These studies have not investigated the identity work undertaken through forms of contextualized or field-dependent cultural capital. Consequently, this research offers few theoretical insights concerning consumers’ reflexive efforts to manage, protect, or enhance the identity value of the cultural and social capital they have acquired through identity investments in a specific field of consumption.

In redressing this gap, we have shown that indie consumers are sensitized to the devaluing threat that the hipster marketplace myth poses to their field-dependent social and cultural capital. In response, they forge demythologizing symbolic boundaries between their consumer identities and the hipster icon, thereby protecting the identity value of their investments in the indie field. Whereas Holt (1998) suggests that the mode of practice (i.e., way of consuming) is what drives social distinction—on the assumptions that class peers will recognize the venerated style of consumption—our findings suggest that knowledge of another’s field-dependent knowledge and social centrality can play an equally critical role in sustaining nuanced symbolic distinctions, such as those between indie aficionados who in some superficial respects resemble the hipster icon and trend-chasing consumers who should rightly be subjected to the unflattering meanings conveyed by the hipster marketplace myth.

We further suggest that more research is needed to investigate the interrelationships between consumers’ generalized and field-dependent cultural capital. As a caveat, this implication is an emergent finding of our study. In the course of the study, we did not administer formal quantitative measures of generalized cultural capital but instead induced the social position of our participants from information gained through the life history portions of their interviews. With this empirical limitation in mind, the patterns in our data suggest that consumers’ levels of generalized cultural capital may be a key factor in determining whether they continue to make identity investments in a field of consumption that has acquired stigmatizing cultural associations.

Based on our qualitative assessment, the indie consumers in our study possess a midlevel volume of generalized cultural capital, rather than the high or low extremes that have been the dichotomous classifications used in previous studies (Allen 2002; Henry 2005; Holt 1998; Üstüner and Holt 2007). Such consumers have more resources for competing in status competitions premised on aesthetic taste than do low cultural capital consumers. Owing to a host of familial and social factors (such as boomer-generation parents who have countercultural interests and antipathies toward mainstream commercial culture) whose influences tend to be glossed over in Bourdieuan accounts of distinction, the consumers in our study are also keenly interested in distinguishing their aesthetic tastes from those who unreflexively and uncritically consume what would be deemed middle-brow culture. Through their immersion in the indie field, midlevel cultural capital consumers can cultivate these distinguishing tastes in a bounded aesthetic realm, where crit-

ical standards of taste are more readily comprehended and socially gauged and reinforced.

Yet these midlevel cultural capital consumers are likely to still feel overmatched and ill equipped to play the cosmopolitan (and aesthetically diversified) status games favored by high cultural capital consumers (Holt 1998; Üstüner and Holt 2010). Accordingly, such consumers' determined efforts to protect their context-dependent cultural capital from being stigmatized in the marketplace may reflect their subordinated position in the broader taste hierarchy and related efforts to maintain their lateral distinctions to others who inhabit a similar sociocultural position. Future research on these interrelationships not only would advance knowledge related to the social patterning of consumption but could also help create a better fit between Bourdieuan-influenced concepts of social reproduction and the variegated status games, logics of distinction, and forms of capital generated by postmodern consumer culture.

Our findings also harbor theoretical implications for recent research on consumers' identity-based motivations for abandoning products, brands, or broadly defined taste categories that become associated with stigmatizing or otherwise undesirable cultural meanings (Berger and Heath 2007, 2008). While this research invokes the term "identity," its underlying conceptualization is more consistent with a social psychological definition of the self-concept as "a system of self-schemas or generalizations about the self derived from past social experiences" (Markus and Wurf 1987, 301). In accordance with this self-schema view of identity, consumers are deemed to have considerable volitional latitude in the identity symbols they choose to brandish or abandon. In these accounts, consumers' perceptions of the identity signals being sent by their socially displayed brands and other visible consumer goods also drive their decisions to either adopt "tastes that distinguish them from other people" or abandon "tastes if too many people, or the 'wrong' types of people, adopt them" (Berger and Heath 2007, 121).

From our standpoint, consumers' investments in a field of consumption leave enduring sociocultural marks on their identities in the form of practical or tacit knowledge, habituated tendencies, and cultivated aesthetic tastes. In this regard, the analogy between aesthetic and gustatory tastes is quite direct (see, e.g., Joy and Sherry 2003) in that both are shaped and often acquired through cultural experiences—as exemplified by Zajonc and Markus's (1982) classic example of adults who have strong and seemingly immutable tastes/cravings for very hot peppers, owing to their early childhood exposures at the hands of their parents who were conditioning them to favor particular culinary traditions. Similarly, the visceral sense of what aesthetic forms one enjoys and the background of knowledge that allows for snap judgments about aesthetic merits (Gladwell 2005) also involve enduring transformations in a consumer's perceptual system. Once acquired, these habituated predispositions and tastes are not a cultural entity that one can shed—in the manner of a T-shirt or a bracelet—because they are integrated into the practices through which con-

sumers materially, affectively, aesthetically, and intellectually relate to the social world (Bourdieu 1984, 1990).

Berger and Heath (2007, 133) propose that their identity-signaling perspective helps "to understand why tastes formerly considered cool die out. Tastes can become cool because they are associated with social groups others consider cool. But if outsiders, or the mainstream more broadly, adopt these tastes they may lose their ability to signal a cool identity." This identity-signaling perspective may well apply to cases where consumers have made little investment beyond buying some fashionable merchandise symbolic of a given consumer identity (e.g., Berger and Heath 2007, 123), but our analysis suggests that aesthetic tastes and consumption practices that have been established in a more embodied manner are not so easily abandoned. Consumers who remove their vested identities from a field of consumption would not be engaging in the equivalent of swapping attire. Rather, they would be forgoing a significant stock of accumulated cultural and social capital (not to mention the economic capital that has been exchanged for these cultural resources) and, in a very material sense, pulling the sociocultural pillars out from under their identity projects. Such vested consumers have strong sociocultural incentives to contest and negate cultural meanings (and imposed marketplace myths) that would undermine the identity value of their acquired field-dependent capital instead of forgoing long-term—sometimes lifelong—identity investments in a field of consumption.

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