MARKET-MEDIATED PLAY AS A CREATIVE MODE OF PUBLIC DIALOGUE

By

Nitisha Tomar

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This dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:

Amber Epp, Associate Professor, Marketing Department, Wisconsin School of Business (Committee Chair)

Craig Thompson, Professor, Marketing Department, Wisconsin School of Business

Page Moreau, Professor, Marketing Department, Wisconsin School of Business

Robert Asen, Professor, Department of Communication Arts (Rhetoric, Politics, and Culture)

ABSTRACT

Market-mediated play offers spaces for consumers to creatively discuss societal issues; however, they also face challenges such as equitable access and safety within these contexts. Consumer research has examined how market-mediated play facilitates fun, hedonism, and collective pursuits, yet it has not explored how consumers can unlock its civic potential. Investigating this is vital, especially for marginalized individuals who may lack the privilege for solely hedonistic pursuits. Thus, I ask: How can market-mediated play function as a creative mode of public dialogue? I investigate the context of story slams (storytelling performance competitions) through comparative ethnography and in-depth interviews. My analysis identifies four pathways from market-mediated play to public dialogue: *inspiring, strengthening, formalizing, and spectaclizing*. The first two pathways reveal consumer transformations that enable creative public dialogue, while the last two pathways hinder it. I find both the quality of social experiences and negotiations around pluralism/inclusion motivate the consumer transformations for each path. My framework extends prior work on market-mediated play by highlighting its civic potential. Attention to the civic could complement design principles predicated upon pleasure and involvement with design justice to empower consumers towards public dialogue.

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INTRODUCTION

Amidst the growing political divides and societal challenges, people are leveraging market-mediated play—interactive and recreational activities facilitated within market-driven environments where consumers and marketers engage in play-related experiences—as a creative medium to advance public dialogue. As a cultural artifact, play has been historically relevant in reflecting dominant cultural themes (O'Sullivan and Shankar 2019). And games have translated complex cultural themes into capsules of fun, consumable experiences. For example, games like tag survive as simulations of prehistoric hunting and gathering risks (Ackerman 2011). In the 20th century, the rise in cultural consciousness of societal issues like economic exploitation and gender-based discrimination resulted in the emergence of board games like *Monopoly*[1] and S*uffragetto*[2], respectively. In contemporary consumer culture, fantasy roleplaying contexts like cosplay[3], RPGs (Role-Playing Game) like Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), and competitive performance cultures like slams (Somers-Willett 2009) and drag[4], are being utilized by consumers to creatively combat racism and explore multiple dimensions of queerness[5]. Recently, political engagements like the 'Black Lives Matter' protest seeped into social simulation video games like Nintendo's *Animal Crossing*[6]. The upcoming immersive market-mediated play worlds utilizing blockchain technologies in the metaverse seem to be embracing similar civic engagement platforms (e.g., the recently launched *Wistaverse*[7]). However, there are challenges

[1] https://aeon.co/ideas/monopoly-was-invented-to-demonstrate-the-evils-of-capitalism
[2] https://www.ft.com/content/9dd9fdee-fb93-11e7-a492-2c9be7f3120a
[3] https://www.streetroots.org/news/2021/12/29/cosplay
[4] https://www.vogue.com/article/ilona-verley-canadas-drag-race-indigenous-queen
[5] https://www.cbr.com/dungeons-dragons-actual-play-shows-boosting-lgbtq-representation/
[6] https://www.theguardian.com/games/2020/aug/07/black-lives-matter-meets-animal-crossing-how-protesters-take-their-activism-into-video-games
[7] https://www.wistaverse.com/

too. Marketplace play cultures can inculcate palliative measures rather than systemic addressal of societal issues like racism[8] and transphobia[9]. Indiscriminate gamification of civic engagement can lead to branding disasters[10]. Racial and gender-based hostility in play cultures can inhibit certain identities from safely engaging in public dialogue (Drenten, Harrison and Pendarvis 2022; Everett et al. 2017; Huntemann 2017; Södergren 2022).

Thus, we need a critical lens to analyse how such market-mediated play can function as civic engagement platforms. Consumer culture studies (Arnould and Thompson 2005) have analysed market-mediated play under the ambit of ludic consumption studies. 'Ludic' comes from *ludus,* which signifies structured forms of play (Caillois 1958). Various studies have examined how *ludic* experiences of fun, hedonism, and pleasure are either facilitated or disrupted in market contexts (Kristiansen, Lindberg and Tempelhaug 2022; Seregina and Weijo 2017; Tumbat and Belk 2011; Woermann and Rokka 2015). However, despite the pervasiveness of political mobilization (and failures of the same) in contemporary market-mediated play contexts (as per the above examples), market-mediated play has not been explored as a manifestation of politicized consumption (Thompson 2011). Thus, an important question arises - How can market-mediated play facilitate or thwart civic engagement?

To answer this primary question, this study critically examines market-mediated play as a creative medium for civic engagement in contemporary consumer culture. It will help market actors in critically designing their market-mediated play contexts to avoid debacles in the civic realm. Further, even as market actors shape future immersive market-mediated play worlds (like

[8] https://www.wargamer.com/dnd/race-changes-wrong-reasons
[9] https://www.dailyuw.com/opinion/critical_conversations/rupaul-and-drag-race-racism-fracking-and-transphobia-galore/article_945fbd6c-9b0a-11ea-81db-ff871a85f1cc.html
[10] https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/16/entertainment/cbs-the-activist/index.html

the metaverse), this study can help them practise “design justice” (Costanza-Chock 2020) that goes beyond design principles predicated upon enforcing pleasurable ludic experiences, to those that empower consumers with inclusive market-mediated play contexts. The following organization of my thesis illustrates the journey of examining how market-mediated play can facilitate or thwart civic engagement.

I start with bringing together public sphere, play, and ludic consumption literatures to set up the theoretical overview for the study. Perspectives from public sphere scholarship suggest how creative modes of public dialogue—communicative processes wherein citizens discuss societal issues (Pfister 2018)—can foster pluralistic and inclusive civic engagement. A review of play studies indicates that structured play is one such creative mode of public dialogue, which displays a unique capacity for imbibing dominant political themes and effecting civic imagination. A review of ludic consumption studies suggests that market-mediated play incorporates a milieu of market logics, resources, and actors (consumers, producers, etc.), which has immense potential in facilitating (or hindering) emancipatory experiences and self-transformations.

Next, I propose to investigate the following three research questions in the context of slam culture - How does the *structure* of market-mediated play facilitate (or thwart) conditions for public dialogue? How can market-mediated play enable (or hinder) *pluralism and inclusion*? How can market-mediated play facilitate (or thwart) *reflexive transformation* of consumers into civic subjects? I present a historicized account of slam culture and describe its empirical relevance as a structured play form with commitment to pluralism, inclusion, and its transformative potential. Thereafter, I outline the research methodology. This will include a

detailed explanation of data collection methods (table 1) in the specific context of story slams, and how data analysis was oriented around answering each of the three research questions.

Finally, I present the findings that identify four pathways from market-mediated play to public dialogue. I find that the structure of market-mediated play introduces a particular quality of social experiences and, in combination with negotiations around pluralism/inclusion, motivates the consumer transformations for each path. The first two pathways reveal consumer transformations that enable creative public dialogue, while the last two pathways hinder it. Thereafter, the discussion section details the theoretical contributions of my study, future research areas, and practical implications.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Public sphere is a social space that is "generated in communicative action" (Habermas 1996) when citizens focus their attention on collective problems (Pfister 2018). It is the "operationalization of civil society's capacity for self-organization, one that emphasized plurality and reason" (Calhoun 1993, 273). Habermas' (1962/1991) foundational text discussed how the late 17th - 18th century society witnessed the emergence of a critical public space for public opinion formation which was separate from the aristocratic state power and interests. This *bourgeois* public sphere emerged from rational debate practices in places like coffeehouses and salons to articulate social will of the citizens, changing the "locus of rhetoric purview from the sites of official discourse to the spheres of interaction within society" (Hauser 1998). By the late 19th century, the public sphere underwent structural transformation such that the state authority was reconstituted through capitalism and rational deliberation was substituted with mass

consumption. Thus, Habermas conceptualized the bourgeois public sphere as an emancipatory moment. However, the contemporary public sphere scholarship has been critical of Habermas' conception of a public sphere that was riddled with problematic exclusions and normalizations of certain kinds of discursive modes.

This discussion treats Habermas' conception of public sphere and the critical publics model in a dialectical, complementary relationship. It appreciates the importance of Habermas' discursive constitution of public sphere, which shifted the assumption of political participation as a phenomenon that can only happen in political offices to one that can also happen in cultural arenas through *public dialogue*. But this discussion also engages with the contemporary publics scholarship that has critically approached problematic assumptions underlying earlier conceptions of the public sphere. Below I discuss three argumentative dimensions constituting critical perspectives of public sphere scholarship and how my study can further advance the scholarship.

The Quest for Creative Modes of Public Dialogue

The earliest critiques of the traditional public sphere model are rooted in feminist scholarship. This literature notes that Habermas' conception of the public sphere emphasized communicative rationality over emotions, affect, or feelings, thereby privileging *logos* over *pathos* (Griffin 1996; Michael DeLuca and Peeples 2002; Smith and Hyde 1991) and overemphasizing rational-critical debate (Benhabib 1992; Davidoff 1998; Fraser 1990; Keane 1998). The assertion of such an "ideal speech situation" (Benhabib 1992, 105) norm elided "full consideration of the emotion, Eros, and *ludus* that motivate human communication, persuade,

and more generally constitute a social realm" (Brouwer 2006, 198). These essentialist norms led to an overemphasis on publics of cognition rather than the consideration of embodied interactions or affective experiences.

Thus, Habermas' model of the public privileges only *linguistic* discourse, thereby disabling a polysemous notion of discourses that can constitute publics. Civil society is a world structured by solidarity and public affectation (Alexander 2006). Hence, it is important to expand manifestations of 'discourse' to imagine further public configurations. Contemporary public sphere scholarship asserts that the term 'discourse' encapsulates variegated modes of collective engagement, having a dynamic "capacity to reference multiple dimensions, argument fields, and modes of communication, enabling us to engage questions of hybridity, hypertextuality, materiality, and performativity" (Finnegan and Kang 2004, 379). Discursive acts are not just speech (written or spoken) acts, as emphasized by Habermas, but can also include non-linguistic performances (Pezzullo 2003) comprising "visual communication and bodily display" (Brouwer 2006, 197).

Contemporary public sphere scholarship has been expanding the conception of discourse and reimagining the multiple modalities it can take (e.g., performances, bodily display, visual communication etc.) towards civic engagement. Lately, critical models of public sphere(s) have asserted that expanding the conception of discourse can help us unravel a multiplicity of publics (Fraser 1990; Pfister 2018; Squires 2002a) in the society, "pluralizing the modes and sites of representation" (Young 2002, 133). When we recognize a multiplicity of discursive engagements in the society, we envision a stronger democracy that facilitates participatory parity (Fraser 1990). This pluralistic focus of critical public sphere scholarship has resulted in the conceptualization of "counterpublics" (Asen 2000; Fraser 1990). Counterpublics are oppositional

discursive arenas that recognize and challenge the dominant public sphere's exclusionary norms of discursive practices and arise in the interest of the marginalized (Asen 2000; Fraser 1990). The discursive acts of BLM (Black Lives Matter) movement constitute a counterpublic that adheres to its "own discursive and resistance strategies as opposed to complying with the expectations and norms governing appropriate discourse and behavior in the public" (Daum 2017, 526). Counterpublics have been especially instrumental in proposing alternative public modalities (Brouwer and Asen 2010). They include "visceral" public engagement (Johnson 2016; Larson 2018) and performances (Pezzullo 2003), "agitation" (Daum 2017), "disrespectability" and "ratchetness" (Davis 2018). Further, the "mass amateurization" (Jackson and Foucault Welles 2015) of media, with a shift of power from news networks to citizens (citizen journalism) has resulted in "networked counterpublics" (Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles 2018; Jackson and Foucault Welles 2015; Kuo 2018).

However, as McKernan (2021) notes, "the bulk of the conventional public sphere research has largely ignored entertainment media and instead focused on what researchers characterize as the world of "serious" news and current events." McGuigan (2005) echoed a similar sentiment by stating that media research in the public sphere scholarship has focused on the consumption of serious, cognitive resources like news but has not considered *affect.* Therefore, McGuigan (2005, 435) conceptualized "cultural public sphere" which refers "to the articulation of politics, public and personal, as a contested terrain through affective – aesthetic and emotional – modes of communication." Other scholars have similarly discussed discursive practices grounded in affect (Papacharissi 2015), emotion (Ahmed 2014; Hariman and Lucaites 2001; Hermes 2006), and feelings (Johnson 2016; Rice 2012). Additionally, Jacobs (2012) conceptualized "aesthetic public sphere" to claim that aesthetic discursive acts provide superior

affective engagement to wider publics. For example, McKernan (2015) studied how the popular video game *Resident Evil 5* ignited discursive engagement amongst the gamers around racism. Additionally, Wu (2017) studied how Chinese reality TV shows and dramas sparked public engagement around corruption and economic inequality.

But even the cultural and aesthetic public sphere scholarship have heavily focused on the "public screen" (Michael DeLuca and Peeples 2002) in the extensively media-scaped environment. This could be because of Warner's (2002) influential emphasis that public does not depend on dialogue but comes into being only through reflexive circulation of *texts.* This perspective seems to have dictated the crossover of public sphere scholarship and media studies while largely relegating issues of embodied experiences in face-to-face (theorized as "intercorporeality" (Meyer and Wedelstaedt 2017)) or virtual environments to the periphery. An interesting implication of this is that the Special Issue of 'Theory, Culture & Society' on 'A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere?' (Seeliger and Sevignani 2022) in 2022 consisted of 6 articles (out of a total of 10) that heavily discussed *digital* publics as the frontier of the upcoming public sphere. Habermas (2022) seems to concur. Thus, the cultural public sphere scholarship still needs to embrace more creative modes of discourse beyond text circulation in mediatized environments.

In my study, I found that play is one such creative mode of discourse that has not been sufficiently explored by cultural public sphere scholarship. Play is a unique interactive system that stimulates considerable affective and emotional engagement (Ackerman 2011; Caillois 1958/2001; De Koven 2013; Huizinga 1949). Understanding how it could function as a potential mediator of political discourse will be very useful. It can help us fathom how playful civic engagements can transpire in the politically charged contemporary consumer culture. The

cultural public sphere scholarship can expand its repertoire of creative modes of civic engagement by engaging a consumer culture lens (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Consumer culture is replete with a range of creative communal phenomena, including extraordinary experiences, ludic experiences, and consumer emancipation (Belk and Costa 1998; Goulding et al. 2009; Hill, Canniford and Eckhardt 2022; Kozinets 2002; Kozinets et al. 2004; Seregina and Weijo 2017). Analysis of playful consumption (Holbrook et al. 1984) has led to numerous studies under the ambit of 'ludic consumption' (Belk and Costa 1998; Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993; Kozinets et al. 2004; Seregina and Weijo 2017), which have analyzed how aspects of the market (market actors, consumers' motivations, material resources, etc.) impact consumers' ludic experiences in market-mediated play environments. In my study, I find that market-mediated play can transform into civic engagement, with various market-mediated factors facilitating or thwarting these transformations. Thus, analysis of market-mediated play can support contemporary public sphere scholarship's quest for creative modes of discursive engagement in the public sphere.

However, consumption arenas have not been extensively studied despite the discursive creativity they can offer to shape publics. This could be a result of how public sphere scholarship has largely assumed that the public sphere is "not an arena of market relations but rather one of discursive relations" (Fraser 1990, 57). Habermas (1992/2015) asserts that "nongovernmental and *non-economic* connections and voluntary associations…anchor the communication structures of the public sphere…" Such an interpretation suggests that market and economic relations are outside the public sphere. However, my study asserts that publics can also emerge from consumption arenas. Market-mediated play contexts can create "propinquity groups" (Dewey 1954) of *citizen*-consumers engaging in creative civic engagement.

But creative modes of discourse are not sufficient to shape a public towards civic engagement. The discursive space needs to embrace a plurality of perspectives and enable inclusion for participatory parity. Below, I discuss public sphere scholarship's take on the same.

Towards Pluralistic and Inclusive Publics

While being emancipatory in its notion, the *bourgeois* public sphere, as outlined by Habermas, has been critiqued for being exclusionary. Critical scholarship asserts that the bourgeois public sphere was not solely a discursive space but was also a hierarchical patterning of social positions, promoting the interests of the bourgeois class while marginalizing others (Griffin 1996). Thus, it was not an "unrealized utopian ideal", as Habermas suggested, but "it was also a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule" (Fraser 1990, 62). The exclusions were either direct (preventing participation of certain identities) or indirect (tacit exclusion because of communicative norms of private/public and relegating women and their issues to the familial private sphere) (Asen 2002). In this discussion, I mainly focus on indirect exclusions pertaining to communicative norms given political advancements in the pluralistic democracy of today have largely led to the erasure of *direct* exclusions based on categories of race, gender etc., at least in the contexts I analyze for the purpose of this study.

Habermas elided such indirect exclusions because he proposed "suspension of status hierarchies" (Fraser 1990, 60) as a requirement for accessibility and exercise of reason in the public sphere. This led to a bracketing of status differentials (Fraser 1990), which he treated as a proxy for political democracy. However, societal *equality* is not sufficient for critical publicity.

Societal *equity,* the perspective of appreciating differences and accommodating them, rather than bracketing them, is conducive to a pluralistic envisioning of political democracy. For example, suspending any consideration of hierarchy in the public sphere ends up sharpening the private/public divide such that societal problems originating in the domestic 'intimate' confines are not rendered as ‘public’ concerns. This marginalizes women by indirectly excluding them from the dominant public sphere (Benhabib 1992; Fraser 1990). Accordingly, the protocols of communicative norms of the bourgeois public sphere were correlated with inequality across categories of status affiliations (Asen 2000; Fraser 1990; Hauser 1999), gender (Benhabib 1992; Davidoff 1998; Fraser 1990; Griffin 1996; Keane 1998), and race (Squires 2002). Thus, Habermas’ conception of the public sphere is emancipatory for only an *exclusive* class of citizens. It was largely *exclusionary* for the underprivileged citizenry.

Therefore, critical public sphere scholarship has asserted that a plurality of perspectives should be foundational to the concept of a public (Fraser 1990; Mouffe 2000), even assigning a celebratory status to differences that arise through pluralism (Calhoun 2002; Mouffe 2013). Hauser (1998, 32) emphasizes that a public is a collectivity whose interactions “are necessarily cognizant of difference that must be addressed as part of society's self-regulating process.” Thus, a more expansive conception of public sphere was required to accommodate such pluralistic possibilities of civic engagement. Scholars proposed “counterpublics” to represent "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourse to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser 1990, 67). Counterpublics expand discursive space by addressing issues that were exempted from contestation in dominant publics or were bracketed out because of the priorities and assumptions of the dominant bourgeois class. Additionally, a “reticulate” model of public

sphere has been proposed to encapsulate the heterogeneity of the public realm such that multiple associational relations constitute a reticulate structure (Hauser 1999). A reticulate public sphere expands discursive space by imagining porosity amongst private/public spheres and thus considering even seemingly 'non-public,' private issues as matters of *political* relevance. Studies in the contemporary public sphere scholarship have studied issues of inclusivity and pluralism while engaging with oppositional models of counterpublics and reticulate models like networked publics (Daum 2017; Davis 2018; Gent 2017; Jackson et al. 2018; Jackson and Foucault Welles 2015; Kuo 2018; de Velasco 2019; Vrikki and Malik 2019).

Although critical public sphere scholarship has made efforts to expand discursive space and incorporate pluralism, it has not critically analyzed these themes in the context of cultural consumption in the marketplace. This could be rooted in how Habermas' texts and critical public sphere scholarship, including counterpublic theory, is rooted in critical theory of the Frankfurt school (Brouwer 2006, 202), which was pessimistic of popular culture and consumption. Habermas (1992) dismissed popular culture industry as only capable of "false empowerment" and studies contextualized in the marketplace discuss how neoliberal regimes of governance can constitute inegalitarian "market public" (Asen 2020) or result in moral responsibilization of the self through individualization (James and Gill 2018). However, as discussed earlier, consumption avenues can constitute creative and aesthetic discursive arenas in the public realm and can, thereby, contribute towards public sphere studies' quest for variegated modes of publicity. Consumption arenas help expand the discursive space by transmuting erstwhile 'private' or 'non-political' issues into vectors of social justice in the marketplace (e.g., drag shows, slam culture).

In fact, various consumption collectives have emerged due to postmodern fragmentation of consumer culture (Firat and Venkatesh 1995), de-emphasizing associative relations based on

kinship structures, class, or other identity matrices and emphasizing association through consumption. Thus, consumption collectives are a departure from the class-constituted bourgeois public sphere and are heterogeneous across affiliation structures of identity categories – resembling the critical public sphere scholarship's stand of pluralism. This *heterogeneity* in consumption collectives can potentially translate into *pluralism* in "emergent collectives" (Asen 2000) of publics. However, "practicing democratic discourse fairly and justly depends indispensably on *enabling* inclusion" (Asen 2002, 345). Purportedly existing for all identities to engage as publics, through my study I find that certain configurations in consumption arenas could, concomitantly, constitute significant barriers towards enabling inclusion. This is because consumption culture comprises a heterogeneous system of actors – consumers, producers, institutional actors and non-human or materials actors, which can configure in multiple ways to realize a variety of logics (pluralist or not) and systems of social relations (inclusive or not). Thus, consumer culture studies can complement contemporary public sphere scholarship's pursuit to discern how democratic facets of pluralism and inclusion are facilitated (or hindered) in marketplace contexts of civic engagement.

Thus, creative modes of discourse that enable pluralism and inclusion will democratically enhance participatory parity in the public sphere. Next step is to understand the transformative consequences that can arise in such contexts of civic engagement.

Transformative Potential of Publics

Habermas' conception of the public sphere and his emphasis on rational-critical deliberation oriented the outcomes of public engagement to be towards *consensus* and

deliberation for the common good (Fraser 1990; Hauser 1998). Mouffe (2000) asserts that such a conception of deliberative democracy ends up favoring a certain set of exclusionary interests (e.g., *bourgeois* class-based public sphere) as it does not appreciate pluralistic ideas and social perspectives (Young 2002). As discussed in the previous section, Habermas' model of the public sphere, bracketing status differentials, was not inclusive of differing social positions. Here we notice how the presupposed consequence of this model, i.e., consensus, was also not pluralistic towards imagining differing social perspectives.

Contemporary public sphere scholarship has advanced this critique by reimagining consequences of public dialogue. Benhabib (1992, 100) asserts that public dialogue "means challenging and redefining the collective good, and one's sense of justice as a result of the public foray." It is about imagining (Asen 2002), "poetic world making" (Pfister 2018) and revisiting one's assumptions and ideas. Thus, new forms of relationality can arise through civic engagement, crystallizing into "emergent collectives"(Asen 2000), i.e., publics. In the same vein, Calhoun (2002) anchors "solidarity," a key aspect of relationality, in civic engagement. He discusses how "the engagement of people with each other in public is itself a form of social solidarity" (Calhoun 2002, 162) and that "reasoned reflection" is crucial to such social solidarity, distinguishing a public from any other collective based on membership or common interests. He posits a question that hints at the transformative potential of collective reflection that can emerge from civic engagement: "Can shared participation in the public sphere anchor a form of social solidarity in which the nature of life together is chosen *as it is constructed*?" (Calhoun 2002, 171). Thus, for Calhoun, the civic imagination resulting from the public sphere is "infinitely contestable, revisable, and negotiable." (Calhoun 2002, 170). A vision of continued transformation as opposed to consensus.

Creative modes of discourse have even a greater transformative potential. Hauser (2022, 33) claims that "moved to the level of performance, rhetoric opens inventional spaces: places where ideas, relationships, emotional bonds, and course of action can be experienced in novel, sometimes *transformative,* ways." Aesthetic communication (McGuigan 2005) in the cultural public sphere can create empathy (Goodin 2003) and help address novel public matters (Young 2002) while imagining others' social perspectives towards a more "reflective democracy" (Goodin 2003). Aesthetic public sphere deals with the imaginary, thus cultivating civic imagination (Jacobs 2012). Visual and embodied modes of public engagement (Palczewski 2002) can help "contest, resist, revision, interrogate, and invent on multiple levels" (hooks 2014, 128). Storytelling can effect a subjective experience to create understanding of the other's differential social position (Young and Benhabib 1996) with Papacharissi (2015) contending how the storytelling infrastructure of media platforms is conducive towards "affective attunement." Reality TV has not only offered a creative mode of representation for the marginalized with limited public voice (Klein and Coleman 2022), but it has also resulted in participants executing "representative performances" for public attention. Thus, contemporary public sphere scholarship discusses the outcomes of a public sphere very differently than did Habermas. The movement is from Habermasian public sphere's potential for *rationally achieved consensus* to public sphere(s)' potential for *intersubjectively produced transformation*.

However, very few contemporary public sphere studies have sufficiently operationalized transformation to examine how it could emerge (or not) in publics. Enabling pluralism and inclusion through counterpublics (Asen 2000; Davis 2018; Fraser 1990), networked (counter)publics (Daum 2017; Hauser 2022; Jackson et al. 2018), and cultural publics (Jacobs 2012; McGuigan 2005) can indeed create hospitable *conditions* for publics. But they might not

necessarily *actualize* transformations. A way to operationalize transformation would be to measure public dialogue's practical force of "consequences" (Bieger 2020; Dewey 1954). People can participate in a public with *intentions* of participating in a pluralist democracy. However, we need to accord analytical attention to the *consequences* of their participation – how are the logics operating in the public enabling/disabling marginalized's representative performances? How, if any, are the adjustments to values and beliefs taking place? How are the calls to publicity entailing revisions of understanding of the 'self' and the 'other'? Is the public facilitating discussions or critical evaluations (Hauser 2022)? Is a new kind of "public knowledge" (Bitzer 1978) acknowledging others' social perspectives (Young 2002) being created?

Creative modes can facilitate transformative processes that encourage culturally diverse participants to discursively communicate and interact with distinct, often challenging, perspectives about the social world. One such transformative process indicating the accomplishment of such a democratic public dialogue is when creative modes enable the "importance of cultural identity, transgression, and difference" (Tucker Jr 2005) and entail "subjectivation" (Touraine 2022)—defined as one's awareness of the capacity to performatively express one's distinct cultural identity and experience in the public sphere. Another indicator is when creative modes prompt individuals to revisit their assumptions and beliefs and imagine new ways of being in society (Castoriadis 1987; hooks 2014).

When it comes to analyzing transformations in marketplace contexts of civic engagement, situations can get trickier. Consumer culture studies have indeed analytically approached the transformative potential of collective consumption and operationalized the same in various marketplace contexts (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Celsi et al.

1993, 1993; Demirbag-Kaplan and Kaplan-Oz 2018; Gopaldas, Siebert and Ertimur 2021; Hill et al. 2022; Kozinets 2002; Lindberg and Østergaard 2015; Orazi and van Laer 2022; Södergren 2022), albeit not adequately in the contexts of creative civic engagement. Habermas (1991), inspired by Frankfurt School's pessimism of consumption culture (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944/2007), asserted that "public, rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unraveled into acts of *individuated* reception." He went on to discuss how one of the factors behind the transformation of the bourgeois public sphere from a "culture-debating public" to a "culture-consuming" public was the rise of mass culture. Goodnight (1982, 226) noted how calls to publicity for attention to collective societal problems could be "supplanted by a perpetual swirl of exciting stimuli" such that "deliberation is replaced by consumption." Thus, any analysis of transformations in marketplace contexts of civic engagement needs to consider the above critical perspectives.

This study's analytical attention is specifically grounded in the conflictual dialectic of how market-mediated play can facilitate or hinder public dialogue. Advanced capitalism in postmodern conditions strategically encapsulates movements with oppositional ideologies (Holt 2002). Therefore, we need to study how consumption avenues can facilitate/hinder emergence of public dialogue, tempering utopian ideals of such publics with pragmatism. Hence, my study analyzes the boundaries of the emergence of public dialogue in a creative consumption context by delineating the (im)possibility of transformative consequences to arise.

So far, I have argumentatively discussed public sphere scholarship and assembled perspectives pertaining to how creative modes of public dialogue can enable pluralistic and inclusive publics to actualize transformations. These perspectives have also been critically addressed through the lens of consumer culture research. Next, we visit one such creative mode

of public dialogue (i.e., play) and assess its unique capacity for pluralism, inclusion, and transformation.

PLAY IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Consumer research had started with discussing market-mediated play as an experience of hedonic fun and enjoyment in the marketplace (Holbrook et al. 1984; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). It has gradually subsumed into a subset of 'ludic consumption' studies that assess how playful extraordinary experiences in consumption contexts can produce shared ritualistic experiences of "communitas" (Turner 1969) and the barriers thereof (Tumbat and Belk 2011; Woermann and Rokka 2015). However, people battling systemic marginalization don't have the privilege for blithe hedonism through play. They re-appropriate play for political purposes, as reviewed in examples in the introduction of this thesis. Hence it is pertinent to examine how market-mediated play can serve as a creative mode of discursive engagement in the public sphere, its capability to create a safe space for actioning vulnerability, and its potential towards effecting transformation.

Play as a Creative Mode of Discourse

The foundational texts on play theory discussed play as an autotelic activity with ludic play (*ludus*) signifying the structured forms of play (Caillois 1958/2001; Huizinga 1949), as opposed to *paidia* that signifies spontaneous, unstructured, and impulsive manifestations of play

(Caillois 1958/2001). Lately, a few play studies scholars (Henricks 2015; Sicart 2014) have emphasized that structured play forms are influenced by dominant cultural themes. These forms become “an ecology of play things and play contexts...from political action to aesthetic performance, through which play is used for expression” (Sicart 2014) and reflect the "overarching cultural commitments of the society" (Henricks 2015, 193). Therefore, structured play forms can reflect dominant cultural themes and condense the engagement with the latter into fun, consumable experiences. Play forms like tag and hide-and-seek survive as simulations of prehistoric hunting and gathering risks in a safer environment (Ackerman 2011). These forms have gradually evolved, from the prehistoric times, based on different needs and risks in contemporary society. One such need is that of expression of societal concerns in a politically charged society, and the corresponding risk is not having that agency and space to enact the same under duress of macrostructural power configurations. This point harkens back to Habermas’ account of how the bourgeois public sphere arose as one such critical public space against aristocratic state power and shifted the locus of rhetorical influence from state to interaction spaces in commonplace society. Although not sufficiently discussed as a creative mode of discursive engagement by Habermas and critical public sphere scholarship, my study finds that play has also reflected these critical concerns by providing a creative discursive field for citizens-as-players to engage with contemporary social, cultural, and political themes.

When structured forms of play, including games, are utilized to implement ludic pedagogy and enact deliberative democracy, they function as “critical play” (Flanagan 2009). Sensitized by a consumption lens of consumer-producer ludic “interagency” (Kozinets et al. 2004), there are two ways of looking at critical play – how consumers appropriate play for civic

engagement purposes and how the producers/institutional actors (game designers, marketers) design play for civic engagement to come by. Let us first look at the former.

Gender politics in the gaming culture have led women, who felt unwelcome in the gaming community, to discover cosplay as the middle ground "between public participation in gaming culture and playing alone" (Everett et al. 2017). Black cosplayers are subverting cosplaying norms through a performative juxtaposition of their skin colour versus the dominant traditional anime stereotypical tropes of black characters[11]. Similarly, consumers are using reality TV shows, drag shows, hip hop battles, and slam cultures as aesthetic public spheres to address issues of racism, economic inequality, LGBTQ+ rights, etc. For example, drag competitions have emerged as creative play platforms to advance representation projects. Symone, a Black queen, performatively demonstrated her support to the BLM movement by wearing a dress exhibiting bullet wounds and the text "say their names" on RuPaul's Drag Race[12]. Ilona, an indigenous non-binary queen, made history as the first indigenous two-spirit queen to compete on Canada Drag Race[13]. Players are leveraging other reality competition shows to engage on critical societal issues. They have done so by opening up about their queer identity, e.g., how a participant performed a character arc reveal in *The Circle,* how a participant, by proposing to her girlfriend on the reality TV dating show *Bachelor in Paradise,* brought forth discussions on normalizing bisexuality, and how we got to see a beautiful bonding between the first transman on *Survivor* and a divinity school student. Consumers have also been converting social simulation games in the digital realm, into political platforms. Queer gamers have been exploring their fluid identities

[11] https://www.streetroots.org/news/2021/12/29/cosplay
[12] https://metro.co.uk/2021/03/06/drag-race-symone-honours-black-lives-matter-with-say-their-names-gown-14199900/
[13] https://www.vogue.com/article/ilona-verley-canadas-drag-race-indigenous-queen

by exercising the flexibility to change their characters' clothes in simulation games, thereby experimenting with gender and sexual representation.

Now let us look at the latter - how market actors have been facilitating civic engagement through play. The board game, *Landlord's Game (1904)* (which later became 'Monopoly'), was designed by a social activist to protest economic exploitation amidst the "reorganization of banking, financial systems, and property ownership in twentieth- century U.S. culture" (Flanagan 2009, 8). *Suffragetto (1908)* board game was designed as an activism platform to help players enact early 20th century first-wave feminist ideology through role-playing in a hybrid fantasy-real world environment. At the height of post-World War II and the palpable Cold War, the board game *Class Struggle (1978)* promoted Marxism through players-as-workers building their power against the capitalists. More recently, Northwestern University professors enacted citizen science through play (Glas et al. 2019) by designing an environmental sustainability game, *Turn up the heat (2015),* for families to consider energy use, making the discussion on energy consumption more enjoyable through the simulation of connection with ecological issues. Video games have also imbibed dominant socio-cultural themes (Bogost 2006; Burak and Parker 2017). Though the rise of some of the most popular video games, first person shooter (FPS) combative games, coincided with assault weapons commercialization at the cusp of the 21st century, there have been certain video games that have been designed as discursive engagement platforms. Organizations like *Institute for the Future*[14], *TESA Collective*[15], and *Games for Change*[16] have been curating games that engage with contemporary societal issues, like racial equality[17],

[14] https://legacy.iftf.org/our-work/people-technology/games/
[15] https://www.tesacollective.com/work-with-us/
[16] https://www.gamesforchange.org/
[17] https://www.gamesforchange.org/games/1000-cut-journey/

LGBTQ+ recognition[18], fascism[19], planned parenthood[20], and mental health[21]. A few are also inculcating immersive media techniques of AR (Augmented Reality) and XR (Extended Reality) to deepen the visceral experience while playing[22].

Therefore, shifts in thematic emphasis through play and games have mirrored the macrostructural shifts in dominant cultural themes – ranging from the rise of property ownership in early 20th century (giving rise to games like Monopoly and Class Struggle) to queer politics, environmental sustainability, and BLM movement in the 21st century (giving rise to political appropriation of play platforms like cosplay, reality TV shows, and social simulation games). Lerner (2014) discusses how incorporation of play techniques can assist in making deliberative democracy much more fun and provides examples of global institutions like the United Nations and other community groups that are facilitating participation in the public sphere. He asserts that governments and institutions should seriously consider redesigning public programs into interactive games for more effective public participation. McGonigal (2011) resonates with her appeal towards positive impact play forms that can drive personal and social change.

However, the picture is not always as rosy. A myopic focus on only play design without due consideration to how marketplace logics can interact with consumption of play can hinder desired public engagement. For one, market actors can be accused of "diversity washing" (Baker et al. 2022). For example, when D&D makers revised the game by removing the characterization of dark-skinned characters as inherently evil, a significant section of consumers criticized these

[18] https://legacy.iftf.org/our-work/people-technology/games/my2024/
[19] https://store.tesacollective.com/collections/games/products/space-cats-fight-fascism-the-board-game
[20] https://www.tesacollective.com/portfolio/we-made-an-online-get-out-the-vote-game-for-planned-parenthood-votes/
[21] https://www.gamesforchange.org/games/arise-a-simple-story/
[22] https://www.gamesforchange.org/xr4c/

changes. They condemned the makers saying that the changes seem to be couched as only improvements in player experience and that the game makers should explicitly acknowledge the game's role in evoking such pernicious racial stereotypes and perpetuating them in much of the fantasy gaming realm. Similarly, when the Epic Games developers, at the peak of the BLM movement post George Floyd's killing, removed police cars from the game *Fortnite*, players mock congratulated them on "successfully ending racism."[23] The fact that *Fortnite* quietly added police cars later shows how these organizational actions are more reactionary to the contemporary political needs of the market rather than careful reflections and systemic addressals. Any use of such play platforms as discursive engagement avenues for consumers gets negatively affected when market actors take such steps because the agency of the consumer gets compromised through changes in rules, format, material elements of the play, which are majorly in control of the institutional actors.

Reality TV shows have also made such missteps. *The Great British Bake Off* received criticism for perpetuating racist stereotypes during 2022's Mexican week show with contestants and hosts displaying racist clothing, incorrect assumptions of authentic Mexican cuisine and communicating via Mexican jokes made in 'bad taste.'[24] The show *Survivor* seemed to suffer from artificially created and, thus, forced inorganic moments when the host initiated the conversation about changing the signature challenge phrase, "Come on in, guys" to just "Come on in!" with hardly any contestant finding it problematic and worth discussing about[25].

[23] https://www.theguardian.com/games/2020/aug/07/black-lives-matter-meets-animal-crossing-how-protesters-take-their-activism-into-video-games
[24] https://www.washingtonpost.com/food/2022/10/06/great-british-baking-show-mexico-stereotypes/
[25] https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a39505867/reality-tv-conversations-about-social-change-survivor/

Another route by which marketplace logics can interact with consumption of play and hinder desired public engagement is how an indiscriminate focus on *gamification* (Bogost 2015; Deterding et al. 2011) by marketplace actors can overlook the social value that play can produce. Game studies scholars and game designers like Sicart (2014), Zimmerman (2015), Frank Lantz, Robin Hunicke, and Ian Bogost are propounding the social impact that play and games can generate. They assert that market actors should not prioritize algorithmic gamification for consumer addiction and escapism but realize the potential of deep play environments for communal empathy. Gamification, the contemporary buzzword, implies adding gameful design element/principles to a practice. This structuring of play can absolutely affect consumer experiences differently, making them more fun, engaging, and participatory. However, gamification also creates the individualist motivation of winning and drive for achievement (Deterding et al. 2011). It stresses a game design that emphasizes habit-forming rituals to bind players' attention through algorithmic priorities. There is, thus, the possibility of such individualistic motivations arising in play and negatively affecting the collective solidarity that would have emerged if consumers were utilizing play platforms for civic engagement. That, in turn, can hinder possibilities of reflection and transformation.

Such an emphasis on addictive engagement through gamification undermines and overlooks deep play's potential of creating social values of empathy and connection and transformation (Ackerman 2011). Achievement gets celebrated at the expense of "moral and spiritual exploration" (Henricks 2015, 195). In fact, this can be seen in how most of the focus in gamification is on game mechanics of points, leaderboards rather than that of "balancing competition and collaboration."[26] Bogost (2015) laments how gamification has permeated

[26] https://www.theguardian.com/technology/appsblog/2012/nov/28/gamification-what-is-it-good-for

various political and social contexts. He terms it as "exploitationware" pointing at how the industries are replacing the real experiential value of play by an over encompassing rhetoric of "gamification" for commercial purposes. Thus, gamification signals at the boundary conditions of play in the marketplace by showing how marketplace logics can manipulate the social value of games for commercial purposes and through routes of commodification. A recent example showcases how indiscriminate gamification can rub the wrong way in society. In 2021, CBS announced a reality competition show *The Activist,* in which six contestants would compete in a variety of activism-themed contests before appearing at a summit of world leaders in Italy. The internet firestorm lambasting such gamification of activism forced CBS to repurpose it from a competitive format into a non-competitive documentary special.

Marketers attempt to boost engagement through gamified design. Currently, various brands are trying to make a foray into the "metaverse", the "embodied internet"[27], by creating branded games and garnering visibility (e.g., *Nikeland*[28]). But they also need to critically think about themes of social impact and solidarity cultivation that, in the contemporary times of challenging societal issues, consumers deeply desire. My study informs how experience design needs to go beyond gamification's priority of blithe repetitive engagement and habit-forming addictive playing towards figuring out how consumers can feel empowered and use such play platforms for public expression and self-transformation. To evaluate current play platforms and envisage future play universes, we need a critical approach to examine how play can serve its uniquely discursive function in the marketplace.

[27] https://about.fb.com/news/2021/10/founders-letter/
[28] https://www.roblox.com/games/7462526249/NIKELAND-NEW

Thus, it becomes pertinent to analyze play as a creative form of discursive engagement. Play can serve a sociocultural purpose relevant to the times we live in. As discussed above, play forms absorb dominant cultural themes of the society and collective play need not solely be a dramaturgical pursuit towards seeking communality but can also go beyond that to manifest critical publicity. As discussed in the section on public sphere studies, creative modes of discursive engagement support much more participatory parity in the public sphere. Play is one such creative way. Play involves active learning and possesses potential for communicating a complex social phenomena in an engaging way (Swain 2007). When one plays, there is considerable affective investment and piquing of engagement (Ackerman 2011; Caillois 2001; De Koven 2013; Fine 2002; Holbrook et al. 1984; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Huizinga 1949; Jenkins 2006). McGonigal (2011) discusses how structured play forms cultivate urgent optimism as one must tackle obstacles, maneuver around the constraints of rules and format for the final goal. She also asserts that players can weave a tighter social fabric as people like others better when they play with them under similar circuits of action, pursuing same goals with trust and cooperation. Further, play forms help condense the complexity of the dominant cultural themes, helping players experience these realities viscerally. However, consumption of play occurs in a nexus of marketplace logics, rife with institutions' stance, the way they design play, and how they navigate commercial logics, all affecting how, and whether, play can be used as a civic engagement tool. Thus, a critical examination is needed to evaluate instances of market-mediated play for public dialogue.

A key facet of a participatory public sphere is how it can shape inclusion and facilitate pluralism. In the next section, I will discuss how play, as a creative discursive mode, can

uniquely enable a safe space for people to practice civic engagement along with the associated challenges.

Pluralism and Inclusion in Play

Sutton-Smith (2009, 17), in his comprehensive text on play in scholarly disciplines, extensively discusses how play forms can be analyzed on the basis of their *extrinsic play functions*, i.e., "…functions they are supposed to serve in the larger culture." Huizinga (1949) had posited that in times past, and in traditional societies, the associational function of play was formalized as commitments to societies through rituals. He called this the "play-festival-rite complex" (Huizinga 1949). This form of play asserts public values with enduring social hierarchies. A classic study by Geertz (2000) exemplifies this. Geertz interpreted Balinese cockfights as impressions of cultural traditions wherein the cocks are symbols of masculinity and status of groups. Thus, themes like death, status, and masculinity were addressed through the "deep play" ritual of Balinese cockfights. However, not all play forms are conforming rituals, as explained below.

It has been established in the previous section that shifts in thematic emphasis through play can mirror macrostructural shifts in society. The "play-festival-rite complex," descriptive of the function of play as status-affirming, coincides well in a society with relationships based on kinship, ethnicity, geographic proximity etc., producing what Durkheim (1893/2014) called "mechanical solidarity." In the contemporary societal conditions of "liquid modernity" (Bauman 2013) marked by globalization, mobility, and liquid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017), play forms might now develop more as activities embedded in associational relationships of

"organic solidarity." Turner (1998) distinguished tribal societies characterized by Durkheimian mechanical solidarity with industrial civilizations characterized by organic solidarity by asserting that obligation dominates the former and subversion dominates the latter. This was a result of the breaking away of the liminal capacities of play from socially enforced ritualistic contexts to more subversive, "liminoid" (Turner 1998) instances of independent play. Similarly, Henricks (2015) discusses how agency in play borne of rituals is conforming, with dominant cultural themes providing a "descending meaning" to play. Whereas agency in play in modern societies is a creative, sensemaking process that has the potential to provide "ascending meaning" by reflexively engaging with dominant cultural themes.

Thus, play has not only reflected shifts in dominant cultural themes through shifts in its thematic emphasis. Play also needs to be rethought from its role as a conforming ritual to a creative medium that could channel non-conforming acts of defiance through *critical* engagement. This rethinking helps us understand how play can serve the function of being a safe space for those utilizing play to discursively critique macrostructural conditions, especially, when the people are marginalized and the less powerful. Below, I discuss how a *carnivalesque* view of play makes a special place for critical perspectives and how it accommodates immunity for the players participating in critique.

Carnivalesque Play. Huizinga's (1949) seminal text on play theory offered a more monolithic form of play, precluding a view of play as a discursive critique of macrostructural conditions. Caillois (1958/2001) expanded Huizinga's conception of play by providing an assortment of play forms resulting from different play attitudes but didn't outline the attitude of critique. Sicart (2014) self-proclaims his work to be post-Huizingan. He asserts that Huizinga's

concept of play as a “magic circle” (Huizinga 1949), i.e., separate from the real life “…weakens the creative and expressive capacities of play, as it can be understood only within the bound context of its own performance, and not within the larger context in which people play, or the multiplicity of intentions behind this activity" (Sicart 2014a, 104). Sicart (2014a, 3–4) fills that gap by deploying Bakhtin’s (1965/2004) theory of the socio-politically defiant collective organization, the “carnival,” stating that "carnivalesque play takes control of the world and gives it to the players for them to explore, challenge, or subvert. It is part of the world it turns upside down. Through carnivalesque play, we express ourselves, taking over the world to laugh at it and make sense of it too” (Sicart 2014, 3–4). Carnivalesque play “…appropriates events, structures and institutions to mock them and trivialize them, or make them deadly serious" (Sicart 2014, 3–4).

Henricks (2015, 195) concurs by discussing how play forms can be utilized for critical *resistance to* rather than solely *expressions of* culture (Henricks, 195). He discusses how play as a mode of critical resistance had been considered by Romanticism era authors like Nietzsche, psychoanalysts like Freud, and play theorists like Sutton-Smith (2009). Henricks also evokes Bakhtin’s notion of “carnival” while distinguishing between critical play that resist hierarchies and play forms derived from rituals/festivals that idealize enduring social hierarchies.

This view of play, as carnivalesque, foreshadows a relatively more politically active player, participating in the creation of “ascending meaning” (Henricks 2015). In contrast, the popular notion of play as “unserious” (Huizinga 1949), “indulgent” (Norbeck 1971), “unproductive” (Caillois 2001) and purely for fun, excitement and hedonistic enjoyment (Holbrook et al. 1984; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) forms the image of a relatively more politically passive player who is escaping the macrostructural realities through the action of play.

Theorists ranging from Huizinga to scholars from the Frankfurt School to even critical perspectives in marketing (O'Sullivan and Shankar 2019) have been inclined to see modern forms of play as inferior to traditional forms because of the former succumbing to frivolousness, mass media co-optation, and neoliberal commercialization. Notwithstanding these concerns, I assert that modern structural conditions have also given rise to critical forms of play or carnivalesque play modes which serve to empower players-as-citizens towards creative critical engagement with dominant cultural realities. Drag shows exemplify this. Butler (1990) describes how drag performances parody essentialized assumptions about gender identity via performances that attempt mimicry of such assumptions, exposing the failed attempts to attain an *ideal* gender identity. Thus, through drag, the macrostructural, essentialized gender identity assumptions are *playfully* challenged to emphasize subaltern identities in the gender spectrum (non-binary and trans identities) for a transformative politics to emerge. Such playful politics incorporates humor and performance in its execution and is not explicitly pedantic, thus constituting a uniquely creative mode of discourse in the public sphere.

However, through my study I see that even as consumption contexts afford such ludic opportunities for carnivalesque play, market logics can refashion these instances of discursive engagement into sellable experiential commodities (Bradshaw and Dholakia 2012; O'Sullivan and Shankar 2019). Langman (2003) asserts that playful articulations in a globalized culture industry manifest as modern consumer culture variants of Bakhtin's "carnivals" which do allow suppressed desires to come forth and encourage resistance, opposition, and transgression. However, the economic realities of the market might end up *managing* the associated "pleasurable release" in such ludic carnivals, constraining resistance to only episodic instances, thereby eroding the possibility of sustaining political communities or enduring critical reason.

Going beyond the argument of market's sanctioning of episodic resistance, Holt (2002, 89) asserts that resistance through consumption is "a form of market-sanctioned cultural experimentation through which the market rejuvenates itself." Thus, agentic perspectives of critical/carnivalesque play need to be critically analyzed from the lens of consumption and markets to spot play's possible commodification by the latter.

Play's Immunity Buffer for Discursive Engagement. Caillois (2001, 158–59) had discussed how play offers a delimited space that grants *immunity* and security to players, unlike non-play life scenarios such that one can test one's own skills and limits in a low-stakes play world. He establishes the "sacred-profane-play" hierarchy (160) to signify the submissive status of a person in the sacred realm, who is at the mercy of the omnipotent for fulfillment, whereas in play, people-as-players can be empowered to become active creators. Play has an enactive quality, as one voluntarily submits to the rules of a game whereas in other areas of life rules become obligatory. This recalls the earlier discussion of how ancient play forms were dominantly ritualistic, and thus conforming, as compared to the salient developments of subversive, carnivalesque play in contemporary cultures (Henricks 2015). Thus, the latter realm of play offers a relatively non-submissive space for players to practice their agency as citizens critiquing macrostructural conditions of the society.

Henricks (2015, 183) argues that "play worlds buffer some of the influences of the broader society and offer formats for self-exploration." Sicart (2014), in line with his conception of carnivalesque play, asserts that play oscillates between creation ('order') and destruction ('disorder') (Apollonian vs. Dionysian dichotomy) by being "carnivalesque." If play worlds buffer societal influences, per Henricks, then the oscillation or reflexive dialectic between an

ordered world consisting of macrostructural power inflections and the temporary disorder world of carnivalesque play happens in a play world where political action is immune to the macrostructure being critiqued. Such buffering by play has often been construed as the "autotelic" nature of play, i.e., the purpose of play is play itself. This conclusion might render the implausibility of playing as a political activity. However, it is the very buffer created by the autotelic nature of play, that shapes a play world which is unserious as play but serious as discursive engagement, inconsequential in terms of instantaneous political effects but consequential in politically inclined microtransformations, and temporary as episodic practice but permanent as political consumer cultures. As Sicart (2014, 75) claims, "…it is precisely the autotelic nature of play that makes it political action. Like carnival, play has a particular status in its relation to reality that allows political action while being relatively immune to the actions of power." The reflexive dialectic between the macrostructural conditions being critiqued and the play world creates playful ruptures which do not produce immediate rejection or penalization of critical-discursive engagement because it is, after all, 'just play!', but can instead provoke potential crisis in fundamental beliefs (Kershaw 2002).

Thus, play need not be a separate world (Huizinga's (1949) "magic circle") with a firm boundary circumscribing autotelic activity. Its boundaries become permeable when play shapes into a field of discourse in the public sphere such that people can dialectically traverse between macrostructural critique and the immune buffer of play while playing for play's sake. Thus, the ludic potential of such carnivalesque play is to be able to engage with political differences in a relatively immune play world that accords a player the freedom to oscillate between breaking rules (dissidence towards macrostructural conditions, e.g., questioning essentialized understandings of gender identity through drag, say) while upholding rules (conventions of the

play form, e.g., following the format of the drag competition reality show 'RuPaul's Drag Race', say).

We have various market-mediated play instances exemplifying the above potential of play. Queer community has discovered *Dungeons & Dragons*, the fantasy tabletop RPG (Role-Playing Game), as a playful "safe space" to reflexively engage with gender roles[29] and explore one's identity while engaging in "queer play."[30] The pro-democracy 2020 Hong Kong protests made their way into the social simulation game, Nintendo's *Animal Crossing: New Horizons,* when activists appropriated the islands in the game as virtual protest sites, laying out "Free Hong Kong, Revolution Now" banners in front of them, and designing protest-themed clothes to share with the larger game community[31]. The game was a safe space for them to do so because they could evade the fierce censorship they were receiving in the hands of the Chinese government. Similarly, the game is touted to deploy the ludic pedagogy of environmental responsibility in its simulated universe, with a tinge of Marxist ideology that supports the game to simulate a sociological system circling around solidarity and mutual aid. The player, as Resident Representative, is responsible for planting trees, preserving wildlife, and making decisions around fossil fuel use. Even institutional sites like museums, which generally are tainted with their colonial looting of colonies' artifacts, are envisioned as sites that support environmental sustainability, e.g., curation of sea life[32].

However, the agentic possibilities of players in similar market-mediated play contexts can also be adversely affected by marketplace logics that propel the mass commercialization of

[29] https://www.dicebreaker.com/games/dungeons-and-dragons-5e/feature/dnd-queer-players-safe-space
[30] https://www.tor.com/2020/02/03/the-power-of-queer-play-in-dungeons-dragons/
[31] https://www.wired.co.uk/article/animal-crossing-hong-kong-protests-coronavirus
[32] https://www.syfy.com/syfy-wire/animal-crossing-new-horizons-and-the-case-for-solidarity

play forms. Institutional and market actors steer play contexts in modern culture industry and can influence carnivalesque motives and immunity that guarantees inclusivity. For example, queens of color, especially black queens have infamously received the "villain edit" on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. 'Villian edit' is what the producers of the reality show incorporate into the episodes' story lines, framing certain contestants as instigators and provocateurs, and editing clips to hype them as the villains of a particular season. Queens of color, because of the show disproportionately stereotyping them through villain edits, have faced racist slurs and even death threats from fans online and in-person[33]. Similarly, when the host RuPaul clarified his stance that he would never let assigned female at birth (AFAB) or trans women compete on the show, it perpetuated the controversial and marginalizing rhetoric that trans women are not actually women, thus selectively oppressing gender identities through the play form of drag.

And just like any consumption collective, play worlds are also heterogeneous (Chalmers Thomas, Price and Schau 2013). This can posit a risk to ideals of pluralism and inclusion in play. For example, as mentioned earlier, gender politics in the gaming culture have led women to discover cosplay as a welcoming play world. However, Everett et al. (2017, 10) argue, as cosplay becomes more commercialized and ventures into mainstream culture, "highly visible women cosplayers have become prime targets for harassment, ridicule, and dismissal at game conventions and beyond…" Huntemann (2017) asserts that such harassment uses women's bodies "to reinstate male dominance in video games." Women cosplayers are accused of either being "attention whores" or "ugly nerds": "Women whose bodies most closely resemble the bodies of video game characters may meet the industry's beauty norms, but because they are

[33] https://www.dailyuw.com/opinion/critical_conversations/rupaul-and-drag-race-racism-fracking-and-transphobia-galore/article_945fbd6c-9b0a-11ea-81db-ff871a85f1cc.html

attractive, they are suspected of faking their fandom. Women whose bodies do not measure up are rejected regardless of their knowledge or devotion to games" (Huntemann 2017, 83–84). Thus, cosplay becomes a hostile play world for women wherein the dominant game culture questions the legitimacy of a woman cosplayer "because of her body's—not her costume's—appearance" (Everett et al. 2017, 10). Another example is when Sara Thompson, a designer and disability advocate, developed a combat wheelchair for *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) to advance inclusion for the differently abled gamers, who could now include wheelchair-using characters in the game. However, she received a backlash from a section of the D&D community who pejoratively dismissed her and other differently abled gamers as weak, even sending her death threats[34]. Thus, play worlds in consumption contexts need to be critically analyzed for their calls to inclusion and their boundary conditions of functioning as a safe space for certain marginalized groups need to be carefully identified.

So far, we have looked at how play can function as a creative mode of discursive engagement and how it can (or cannot) encompass pluralism and inclusion. An important question to posit at this point is – What could be the possible *consequences* of such play forms and how can we conceptualize them? In the next section, I discuss how play can support the possibility of two such consequences - civic imagination and transformations.

Transformations Through Play

[34] https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-02/dungeons-and-dragons-disability-in-tabletop-gaming/100068926

Play's consequences have mostly been discussed as progressive paths to self-transformation in developmental psychology, and have, thereby, been dominantly oriented around cognition and schema (Freud 1963; Piaget 1955, 1962). Piaget intellectualized play, focusing on rationalist orientations, i.e., how children and young adults develop schemas, through play, to enhance reasoning capability. Freud posited the "pleasure principle" of play - how play is a psycho-biological expression of subconscious impulses and desires. These developments coincided with the rise of an instrumentalist society in the 20th century that favored the rhetoric of "play-as-progress" (Sutton-Smith 2009). Even certain sociological texts have overtly emphasized "biopsychological explanations of play" (Caillois 1939/2001, 152) and corresponding play attitudes (Caillois 1958/2001). This emphasis on productive utility of play coincides with the observations of social and political theorists about modernity favoring an instrumentalist society (Tönnies 1887) based around means-end rationality (Weber 1978). A *managed* self emerges in such a society wherein even creative endeavors like play attain a teleological orientation of progress and development.

However, play can have a broader purpose in the culture of today. It can serve as a powerful tool for effecting collective meso-level experiences rather than for solely micro-level psychological development. Below, I discuss how play can render civic imagination and its related capacity for transformation.

Play as civic imagination. Play, through its capacity to generate meso-level associational relationships, can serve as a valuable "mediating context" between the micro-level experiences grounded in the psyche and the macro-level field of culture and public ideas (Henricks 2015, 74–75). In this mediating context, people can deploy play as a tool to re-imagine

macrostructural conditions. Play can thus be used to enact imaginative performances (Vygotsky 1976; 1978). Players can reflexively engage in play to imagine “ideal selves” and the ideal civic situation of the world (Jenkins, Peters-Lazaro and Shresthova 2020). Thus, play forms can not only reflect dominant cultural themes in the society, but can also trigger “civic imagination” (Jenkins et al. 2020), acting back, imaginatively, on the civic situation. A contemporary practical example is how the queer community members explore different gender roles and the spectrum of sexuality through fantasy roleplaying games like D&D or through the culture of drag. Such a perspective of play, then, suggests transformative possibilities of the self through play as imaginative performance. This perspective does not limit the nature of *self* to the psyche or mental models, unlike the developmental psychology literature on play restricting play’s transformative effects to the mind (Piaget) or to mind and emotions (Freud). It views the self at the nexus of associations – bodily, societal, and cultural.

Play can support an "intersubjective dialogue” (Henricks 2015, 211) between this self and the macrostructural realities. Play in action creates *playworlds,* which are instantiated temporally and spatially outside the everyday realms of life. In these playworlds, people interact with one another, through play. But they can also explore themes of the civic life imaginatively (Bakhtin 1981; Sutton-Smith 2009; Vygotsky 1978). Sicart (2014) asserts that play is an aesthetic practice and deploys Kester’s (2004, 2011) notion of “dialogical aesthetics” to unravel the imaginative capacities of play. The notion focuses on dialogue-based creative social practices that can create new knowledge. By applying the notion of dialogical aesthetics in communal play, we can unravel how play can create “public knowledge” (Bitzer 1978) that acknowledges pluralistic social perspectives (Young 2002). For example, drag pedagogy via Drag Queen Story Hour deploys queer imagination to revisit gender ideals through various playful activities like

storytelling, crafts, and lip-syncing songs for both children and their parents (Keenan and Hot Mess 2020). Sicart (2014, 67) provides the examples of Nordic live action role playing games that explore thorny issues through play, e.g., *Fat Man Down* game wherein players role-play bullying of the fattest player. The game is for fun in the meso-level playworld but it puts players in dialogue with the societal issues of bullying and obesity through imaginative performances. Thus, such a play space enables the "transmission of experiences and knowledge from the activity of play to our worldview"(Sicart 2014, 67) which has been called “bleed” (Orazi and van Laer 2022; Sicart 2014). Such dialogical aesthetic practices exist in various consumption contexts as “participatory cultures” (Jenkins 2006) wherein people engage in creative *dialogue* rather than being divided across the dramaturgical performer-audience divide in performance/entertainment spaces (Deighton 1992; Goffman 1978).

Cultural sector, constituting consumption contexts of play, is a fertile ground to analyze such possibilities of civic imagination (Jenkins et al. 2020). This sector consists of organizations favoring the ethic of solidarity economy (valuing people over profits like non-profit organizations), with many of them community-controlled, grassroots, and hyperlocal consumption contexts[35]. Such consumption contexts serve as local publics wherein societal issues can be revisited, interrogated, and examined in creative ways. Although play in such consumption contexts holds a tremendous potential for civic imagination, modern consumer culture can also arrest that possibility to come about. Huizinga (1949) and the Frankfurt School theorists have been critical of the commercialization and systematization of play and its transition to controlling organizational systems in industrial (late modern) societies. They posit that play in such societies has become a means to attain pleasure and escapism through

[35] https://nonprofitquarterly.org/the-art-worlds-we-want-solidarity-art-economies/

professionalized entertainment rather than a means for active sociocultural participation. Thus, consumption contexts of play must be critically examined to see how they potentially can and cannot function as creative modes of discursive engagement facilitating civic imagination. One aspect that is pertinent for such a critical evaluation is the possibility of transformations through play.

Altered States and Ascending Meanings. Ackerman (2011) and Caillois (2001) have discussed how play creates a sacred activity space. The association of play with the sacred is the residual effect of how traditional societal conditions favored play coupled with religious or spiritual rituals such that play and games were "holy events with cosmic significance" (Ackerman 2011, 85). Ackerman argues that purification is one of the desired consequences of those indulging in deep play. Such sacralized experiences like purification point towards strife for transformation through play. When play inculcates reflexive experiences that transcend pleasure, fun, and enjoyment, it becomes "deep play" (Ackerman 2011). Deep play "arises in moments of transcendence, while doing things worthwhile…" and triggers an "altered state" (Ackerman 2011, 13) of consciousness. Such play scenarios in consumption contexts might not result in large-scale, enduring political mobilization but the resulting civic imagination can induce "microtransformations" (Gopaldas, Carnevale, et al. 2021, 2021), i.e., changes to consumers' thoughts and feelings.

More importantly, play results in an "echo of complicity" (Caillois 2001) amongst the players, a combined purpose due to the "following of certain rules on a limited playing field" (Ackerman 2011) with the structure "reinforcing collective value systems" (Ackerman 2011, 144). Murphy and White's (1995/2011) compendium details how play circumscribes an ordered

spiritual enclave, resembling religious pilgrimages, ashrams, and monasteries, and how “the spatial and temporal boundedness of sport, by ordering and sublimating our energies and by closing off the world's drudgery and confusion, can evoke our spiritual depths like a work of art or a monastic discipline." Such spiritual evocation by play makes it a strategy of meaning-making "that finds its end in self-realization" (Henricks 2015, 209). Henricks (2015, 209) advances the thesis that “play is fundamentally a sense-making activity and that the broader goal of this process is to construct the subjectively inhabited sphere of operations and understandings called the self. People play in order to learn who they are, how they are situated, and what they can do.” Through play, people can confront their beliefs, value systems, and societal norms. Play affords the ability for people to “fit the goings-on of the world into symbolically articulated frames” (Henricks 2015, 210). Thus, play helps make sense of the world while also being a tool for self-realization. One recognizes themselves, the "I", but in relation to others, the "We" (Honneth 2012). Play supports this dialectic between the self and the broader sociocultural situations, i.e., macrostructural conditions, resulting in the possibility of transformation through self-realization and changes in beliefs and values.

Through its capacity for self-realization and sensemaking, play provides fertile ground to develop “ascending meaning” (Henricks 2015, 50), i.e., reflection upon the macro-societal conditions through experiences in the meso-ludic context. Thus, through such deep play, one doesn’t escape and leave the lifeworld or the macrosystems of the world behind. One takes the episodic identity of a player and deep play contextualizes the macrosystems into ludic experiences that manifest as reflections upon the self and the world, inducing self-realization. For example, in the aforementioned roleplaying game, *Fat Man Down*, imaginative performances can catalyze transformation of one’s opinions on bullying and obesity. Given

games condense complex socio-cultural themes, people get the opportunity to experience a diversity of roles and pathways viscerally through play. Players can step into a make-believe world and engage with a diversity of roles across cultural categories of gender, ethnicity, race, religion, economic status etc. Such imaginative performances can enable transformations. Elizabeth Magie, who created *The Landlord's Game* (now *Monopoly)* in the early 1900s, expressed her concept in a 1902 issue of the *Single Tax Review* stating that the game is a "practical demonstration of the present system of land-grabbing with all its usual outcomes and consequences." Her intent behind the game as a tool to transform a generation of people in the economic system of the time is expressed when she writes, "Let the children once see clearly the gross injustice of our present land system and when they grow up, if they are allowed to develop naturally, the evil will soon be remedied…"[36] (Pilon 2015).

Thus, macrostructural issues need not only be intellectually discussed through rational-critical model of deliberation, which the Habermasian model of the public sphere has championed. They can also be engaged with viscerally through play, potentially resulting in new knowledge creation. For example, in the Immersive VR experience *1000 Cut Journey*[37]*,* launched in 2018 by the non-profit *Games for Change* in collaboration with the Stanford University Virtual Human Interaction Lab, players embody a Black male character who experiences racism as a child in the classroom, then as an adolescent while encountering the police, and then as a young adult in a discriminatory workplace[38]. The game developers assert that such a visceral experience can shift perspectives on the issue of racism. Other games,

[36] https://www.alternet.org/2019/08/a-peoples-history-of-board-games/
[37] https://www.gamesforchange.org/games/1000-cut-journey/#:~:text=1%2C000%20Cut%20Journey%20is%20an,young%20adult%20experiencing%20workplace%20discrimination
[38] https://stanfordvr.com/1000cut/

similarly, address various societal issues, e.g., hate speech[39], accessibility[40], and recognition of queer identities[41].

Various such experiential consumption contexts have lately facilitated such a dialectical engagement of the self with macrostructural issues in society. For example, civic engagement with urban issues has been made playful through games like *Urbanology* as part of the BMW Guggenheim lab, a mobile laboratory that served the function of a community center and gathering space, which helped people envision their cities and public life[42], shaping active citizen participation. Another example was the *24 Hour City Project*[43] wherein interactive pieces helped citizens explore new ways of connecting with and understanding urban issues. Such playful experiential contexts facilitate public engagement with urban issues and can influence transformations (Conceição 2021). Similar reflections on macro-issues have come about through play in the context of reality game shows. A few instances in such shows have exhibited transformative capacities of play, for example, when a 2015 *The Great British Bake Off* winner *spoke as* a British Muslim "as much as a skilled baker following her appearance" (Klein and Coleman 2022).

But any critical analysis of such contexts of play requires us to clearly assess what transformations can look like and whether they manifest. Play studies have not satisfactorily elaborated on concrete manifestations of transformations through play. One primary reason could be the elision of material and economic factors that constitute play by the dominant sociological strand of play studies (Caillois 2001; Huizinga 1949) which was heavily skewed towards

[39] https://www.gamesforchange.org/games/the-cat-in-the-hijab/
[40] https://www.gamesforchange.org/games/a-blind-legend/
[41] https://www.gamesforchange.org/games/another-dream/
[42] http://www.bmwguggenheimlab.org/urbanology-online, http://www.bmwguggenheimlab.org/what-is-the-lab
[43] http://gamification.co/2011/08/29/how-do-you-make-an-intelligent-city-the-24-hour-city-project/

analyzing play attitudes or play behavior's evolution. Other studies have also analyzed rhetorics of play (Sutton-Smith 2009) and philosophical meanings behind play (De Koven 2013; Suits 2014), but not how non-human factors like materiality and design of play can influence transformations of what kind and to what effect.

One finds consumption studies addressing that gap. Various studies have analyzed the role of a diversity of consumption factors including consumers' ideologies (Tumbat and Belk 2011), non-human material elements (Canniford and Shankar 2013), and servicescapes (Higgins and Hamilton 2019) in facilitating or adversely affecting transformations in extraordinary consumption experiences. The literature has also recently proposed frameworks to tackle the issue of operationalizing transformations in consumption contexts, by proposing conceptual frameworks like "microtransformations" (Gopaldas, Carnevale, et al. 2021), how they are facilitated by servicescape design (Gopaldas, Siebert, et al. 2021) and outlining transformative recursive process models (Orazi and van Laer 2022).

Thus, this is an important juncture to dive into the strand of consumer studies that has explicitly studied market-mediated play, i.e., ludic consumption. The following review of this domain will also involve explicit connections with the above arguments in public sphere and play studies.

MARKET-MEDIATED PLAY, LUDIC CONSUMPTION

Consumption studies on market-mediated play are assimilated under the thematic domain of 'marketplace cultures' (Arnould and Thompson 2005), one of the four integral tenets of

consumer culture research. Analysis of play in consumer experiences has emphasized its potential for materializing consumer fantasy, passion, fun, and self-exploration (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Holbrook et al. 1984; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). The sub-domain of *ludic* consumption studies has highlighted play as a spatiotemporally bounded experience embedded in consumption contexts. Ludic communal consumption studies have discussed how shared experiences of play facilitate communing and socializing (Holt 1995), transcendent camaraderie (Celsi et al. 1993), solidarity and communitas (Arnould and Price 1993), and consumer creativity (Bradford and Sherry Jr 2017). Certain studies have emphasized how consumers exercise agency via ludic consumption, utilizing marketplace resources to structure different forms of sociability (Boulaire and Cova 2013; Canniford and Shankar 2013; Kozinets 2002; Kozinets et al. 2004; Seregina and Weijo 2017), including communities (Chalmers Thomas et al. 2013; Seregina and Weijo 2017), subcultures (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), and tribes (Cova, Kozinets and Shankar 2007). These studies have also illuminated the role of market actors in shaping ludic experiences (Arnould and Price 1993; Hill et al. 2022; Kozinets et al. 2004), specifically the role of material elements (Canniford and Shankar 2013; Chalmers Thomas et al. 2013; Scott, Cayla and Cova 2017; Seregina and Weijo 2017; Södergren 2022; Woermann and Rokka 2015), servicescapes (Hill et al. 2022; Kozinets et al. 2004; Seregina and Weijo 2017), and consumption atmospheres (Bradford and Sherry Jr 2017; Hill et al. 2022; Scott et al. 2017).

O’Sullivan and Shankar (2019) claim that play theory has "been underutilized to understand consumer behaviour" and this might be because the social sciences have "taken much less notice of adult play." I partially concur with this. Certain social science streams, namely, educational and developmental psychology have bestowed disproportionate focus on

psychological benefits of play (Sternberg 1996) and have, thus, emphasized pedagogical investments for utilitarian priorities, resulting in the dominant "play-as-progress" rhetoric (Sutton-Smith 2009). In contrast to this skewed focus on the psychological facets of play that privileges instrumental learning and utilitarian priorities of the society, communal consumption studies have considerably advanced research on sociocultural and material facets of adult play (Holbrook et al. 1984; Holt 1995; Kozinets et al. 2004; Scott et al. 2017; Seregina and Weijo 2017).

However, certain strands of social sciences have indeed been helpful in analyzing the social and cultural framing approach of play as well (Caillois 2001; De Koven 2013; Huizinga 1949; Sutton-Smith 2009), as discussed in the previous literature review section. Notably, the dominant sociological strand of play studies has analyzed adult play attitudes (Caillois 2001) and evolution of play in contemporary society (Huizinga 1949), rhetorics of play (Sutton-Smith 2009), and philosophical meanings behind play (De Koven 2013; Suits 2014). However, in these analyses, the symbolic reality of play is largely restricted to phenomenological experiences of play attitudes and cultural framing of play (Goffman 1974; Huizinga 1949). They help explain how people, through play, can attain sociability - the recognition of a "We" (Honneth 2012). People understand which behaviors are relevant in the play setting and create a shared understanding (Fine 2021). However, these domains do not adequately analyze how the broader play environment, e.g., affordances (Gibson 1977), consumptionscapes (Venkatraman and Nelson 2008), and servicescapes (Sherry 1998) can influence ludic experiences. Ludic consumption studies, on the other hand, have done a commendable job in addressing that lacuna by accounting for material, spatial, and economic factors in ludic communal engagement (Bradford and Sherry Jr 2017; Canniford and Shankar 2013; Chalmers Thomas et al. 2013; Hill

et al. 2022; Scott et al. 2017; Seregina and Weijo 2017; Södergren 2022; Woermann and Rokka 2015).

I extend O'Sullivan and Shankar's (2019) claim of underutilization of play theory in studying consumer behaviour, albeit a bit differently. The analyses of ludic experiences in consumer research largely emphasize either experiences of fun, hedonic pleasure, enjoyment (Holbrook et al. 1984; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), and flow (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikzentmihaly 1990; Woermann and Rokka 2015) or communal experiences of "communitas" and solidarity (Arnould and Price 1993; Celsi et al. 1993; Kozinets 2002). Despite the glaring recognition of the fact that play "absorbs and represents macrostructural conditions" (O'Sullivan and Shankar 2019) and games reflect the dominant cultural themes, as discussed in the previous review of play studies, the potential of market-mediated play as a platform for public dialogue, to discursively critique macrostructural conditions has been understudied.

The extant analyses of market-mediated play in consumer research do offer valuable insights on how fun, hedonism, and communality are enabled (or hindered). These analyses seem to compensate for the aforementioned overemphasis on pedagogical and utilitarian benefits of play, which today manifests as pervasive adoption of gamification (Bogost 2015; Deterding et al. 2011; Dymek 2018). However, I insist for us to go a step beyond that. We can leverage the valuable corpus of ludic communal consumption research to understand the contexts in which consumers can exercise their *political* agency through market-mediated play. We do not currently have a satisfactory scholarly yield to tackle this question - How can ludic *consumption* translate into ludic *citizenship*? This is an important question to investigate because political engagement is not confined to voting as a citizen anymore. People as consumers indeed engage in politicized consumption practices like buying sustainable goods or assisting the marginalized communities

through the marketplace (e.g., buying from Black-owned businesses). However, are there "other manifestations of politicized consumption that do not depend upon the canonized power of the purse strings?" (Thompson 2011, 140). This study proposes market-mediated play as one such possible manifestation of politicized consumption.

Consumers can imbue market-mediated play with political significations. An analysis of such contexts can offer unique insights on not only how consumers can attain flickers of emancipatory possibilities of community and solidarity in a highly individualized, regimented neoliberal society but also how consumers can discursively engage in the public sphere through play. Consumers are not only having fun and relishing hedonic enjoyment through play (Belk and Costa 1998; Celsi et al. 1993; Holbrook et al. 1984; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), they are also *utilizing* such instances of ludic consumption in market-mediated play to creatively discuss socio-political issues. However, consumer culture research on market-mediated play, encapsulated largely in ludic consumption research, has not explored the potential of ludic experiences to function as discursive modes of civic engagement. This might be due to a skewed focus on the pleasurable and hedonic consequences of play in the foundational texts. Holbrook et al. (1984) proposed three key dimensions of play as a consumption experience: intrinsically motivating, self-oriented, and active. The locus of these dimensions is the consumer's self, and thus studies building upon this conception of play have largely favored the analysis of pleasure-seeking and hedonic ludic consumption - often solipsistic in nature. However, as per the examples discussed earlier, consumers are utilizing various market-mediated play contexts in contemporary consumer culture to not only engage in ludic consumption scenarios for fun and creative expression, but also discursively critique societal conditions. More importantly, the marginalized and the powerless do not necessarily have the privilege to be engaged in autotelic,

self-oriented, and hedonic pursuits of play. Play can become a serious, politically engaging act for them. Players, as consumer-citizens, can blend their ludic consumption realms with the civic realm to enact civic imaginaries (Jenkins et al. 2020). Additionally, market-mediated play worlds are participatory cultures (Jenkins 2006) which are much more accessible to the larger populace for political enactments and communication of civic discourses as compared to journalistic worlds or related author-centric broadcast cultures.

Thus, market-mediated play can not only encapsulate fun, enjoyment, and self-exploration but also serve as a ludic conduit to discursively engage with societal issues. Critical public sphere scholarship has emphasized how creative modes of public discourse address limitations of the Habermasian rational-deliberation model by expanding dimensions of discursive engagement (Finnegan and Kang 2004) from those privileging cognition to conceptions accentuating affect and feelings (Brouwer 2006; Griffin 1996; Michael DeLuca and Peeples 2002; Smith and Hyde 1991). Ludic consumption, through market-mediated play, has immense potential in that regard. The studies in this domain have displayed its impressive capacity for affective engagement that results in communitas (Arnould and Price 1993), solidarity (Kozinets 2002), camaraderie (Celsi et al. 1993), and intercorporeal interactions (Woermann 2017; Woermann and Rokka 2015). The advent of mixed reality consumptionscapes, constituting play platforms in the social universes like the metaverse, will only intensify the complexity of multisensory interpersonal engagement, revising the meanings of embodied engagement and intercorporeality in play. Discursive engagement through market-mediated play has begun to transcend spatial and embodiment barriers, as seen in the protests on social simulation video games like *Animal Crossing.* A critical lens is needed to analyze further upcoming and yet unexplored civic engagement potential of market-mediated play. The critical

lens will serve as a useful tool to analyze market-mediated play contexts functioning (or attempting to function) as civic engagement platforms in the public sphere. It will serve as an expedient resource for consumer studies scholars to yield a gamut of investigations into such marketplace culture contexts, concomitantly contributing to the larger public sphere scholarship and its sub-domain of cultural public sphere (McGuigan 2005).

However, market-mediated play may not always lead to fun, enjoyment, and solidarity. Ludic communal consumption studies have discussed not only how ludic communal experiences can emerge (Arnould and Price 1993) and be sustained by consumers and market actors in market-mediated play (Chalmers Thomas et al. 2013; Kozinets 2002; Seregina and Weijo 2017), but also how tensions and conflicts can hinder the same (Canniford and Shankar 2013; Kristiansen et al. 2022; Tumbat and Belk 2011). Thus, any observation of a market-mediated play context that is also functioning as a civic engagement tool, needs to account for the tensions that can come about, hindering the possibility or sustenance of public dialogue through play. Further, neoliberal capitalism has been notorious for commercially co-opting consumer resistance and politicized consumption practices (Bradshaw and Dholakia 2012; Cova, Maclaran and Bradshaw 2013; Holt 2002; Thompson 2011; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007). Therefore, marketplace structures of rationalized competition could adversely affect market-mediated play (O'Sullivan and Shankar 2019), specifically those functioning as civic engagement platforms. Certain marketplace culture experiences, embodying the neoliberal ethos of competition and commercialization, could limit "agentic cultural creativity" (O'Sullivan and Shankar 2019, 3). Prioritization of such market logics could also impede public dialogue. Joseph (2021), in his discussion on ludic consumption economies in the context of digital games, talks about how under the cultural economy of neoliberal late capitalism and its boost to

platformization, games have increasingly become shops selling in-game "contingent commodities" and are not necessarily pure play spaces. Further, as previously discussed, certain marketplace actors are increasingly promoting collective consumption through gamification (Bogost 2015; Deterding et al. 2011; Dymek 2018), privileging habit-forming rituals and algorithmic priorities, shaping market-mediated play into "exploitationware" (Bogost 2015) for the sake of profit. Hence, we need to critically approach ludic consumption instances wherein consumers are utilizing market-mediated play for public dialogue.

Market-Mediated Play Structure. Studies on market-mediated play have shown how how consumers can structurally configure the context to facilitate favorable experiences of fun, camaraderie, and communality (Belk and Costa 1998; Canniford and Shankar 2013; Chalmers Thomas et al. 2013; Kozinets et al. 2004; Seregina and Weijo 2017) and how market actors can facilitate the same (Goulding et al. 2009; Kozinets 2002; Kozinets et al. 2004; Scott et al. 2017). Consumer studies have also foregrounded the role of servicescape design (Higgins and Hamilton 2019; Sherry 1998; Venkatraman and Nelson 2008) in orchestrating such ludic experiences (Bradford and Sherry Jr 2017; Kozinets et al. 2004; Woermann and Rokka 2015). Additionally, a few studies have highlighted how certain market-mediated play configurations can deter favourable ludic experiences from emerging in similar contexts (Canniford and Shankar 2013; Kozinets 2002; Kristiansen et al. 2022; Lindberg and Østergaard 2015; Seregina and Weijo 2017; Tumbat and Belk 2011). Thus, any critical analysis of a market-mediated play context, which is functioning as a civic engagement platform, needs to account for the structural makeup of play that underlies it. This will help us to carefully inspect how the ludic structure mediates (or hinders) the circulation of civic discourse.

Play worlds create a bounded, symbolic reality with common principles (e.g., structural ludic elements like rules and format of play) that all players must adhere to for the ludic experience to emerge in its intended integrity. This creates an "echo of complicity" (Caillois 1958/2001) and structures what is (in)admissible through ludic participation. The architecture of play (comprising of ludic elements like rules, format, material elements, etc.) will shape the consequences of play. Does the market-mediated play context only offer possibilities for hedonist pleasure, communality, and fun or can it also empower consumers to deploy play as a discursive tool for public dialogue? I insist that the structure of market-mediated play be seriously engaged with to answer this question. Certain structural elements might be conducive towards effecting a pleasurable and communal ludic experience. But they might not adequately support the possibilities of the market-mediated play context to yield public dialogue. This requires delineating the various structural elements that comprise a market-mediated play context and how their configurations can affect the prospects of public dialogue. For example, rules are integral structural elements of play and games. However, Woermann and Rokka (2015) rightly contend that rules have not been given sufficient attention in consumer research and have only been treated as influential elements in ludic consumption practices. In the same vein, Graeber asserts that games are "utopia of rules" as "unlike in real life, one has submitted oneself to the rules completely voluntary" in play and this "is the source of pleasure" (Graeber 2015, 191).

I concur with the above assertions about the vital role of play's architectural components (e.g., rules). I extend their arguments by stating that the variation in structures of play not only affects the modality of participation (e.g., competitive vs. role playing structure) but also affects the civic engagement possibility and associated civic meanings of the market-mediated play context in question. For example, when CBS attempted to come up with *The Activist* as a

competitive reality show, this competitive ludic design was unpalatable for consumers and activists. This is probably because the sensational ludification of activism pitted activists against one another, which collided with the culturally shared meaning of activism as a non-competitive civic phenomenon rooted in solidarity. A critical examination of the relationship between market-mediated play and public dialogue could have better informed the CBS team to discern that the reality show will not be consumed as a sensational ludic engagement platform but that it will be situated alongside the culturally shared civic meaning of activism. After understanding how such a market-mediated play platform could, instead, serve as a site of public dialogue on activism, CBS could have foreseen and prevented the branding fiasco.

By emphasizing the dimension of structured play, one can be more thorough in one's conclusions and avoid reductive deductions. For example, interpersonal tensions in ludic experiences might be reduced to individualized competitive performance ideologies (Tumbat and Belk 2011) or motivations (Chalmers Thomas et al. 2013; Kozinets 2002; Seregina and Weijo 2017) without an exhaustive understanding of how the structure of market-mediated play could have potentially fashioned such individuated ideologies and motivations in the first place. For example, Tumbat and Belk (2011) highlight how individualistic and competitive performance ideologies can create tensions in extraordinary consumer experiences, specifically in their context of Everest base camp climbers. However, the paper pays disproportionate attention to consumers' ideologies and motivations rather than to how the structuring of the ludic experience could have led to these tensions. The way the guides curate the group climbing experience along with the inherent shared meaning of reaching the Everest summit are all oriented around challenge and self-exhibition. Compare it to a ludic experience that were, instead, structured as a sacred pilgrimage activity (Higgins and Hamilton 2019) with the shared meaning of therapeutic

accomplishment. Further, the market-mediated play context in their study is a dangerous high-altitude peak (Everest) with possible traumatic scenarios haunting climbers' minds (e.g., risk of death, frostbite etc.,), and thus it is an extraordinary experience with *high stakes.* Compare it to a ludic experience that were, instead, a relatively *low stakes* communitas-inducing river rafting experience (Arnould and Price 1993). Hence, it is imperative that any investigation into a market-mediated play context that can function as a civic engagement platform also needs to go beyond individualistic motivations and ideologies. It needs to critically consider the structural elements and how they can enhance (or hinder) interpersonal tensions and conflicts that will, in turn, influence possibilities of public dialogue.

Thus, this leads us to the first research question - How does the *structure* of market-mediated play facilitate (or thwart) conditions for public dialogue?

Towards Pluralistic and Inclusive Heterogeneity. Market-mediated play foregrounds the agency of consumers in the marketplace and it has been characterized as a manifestation of the emancipatory turn marked by the postmodern fragmentation of consumer culture (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; O'Sullivan and Shankar 2019). Consumers mobilize marketplace resources to negotiate their identities (Belk and Costa 1998), create value through consumption (Boulaire and Cova 2013; Cova and Dalli 2009; Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2010), materialize their consumer fantasies (Demirbag-Kaplan and Kaplan-Oz 2018), and manifest their agentic creativity through market-mediated play (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Kozinets 2002; Seregina and Weijo 2017). Consumers have engaged in communal consumption contexts of play and extraordinary experiences to foster associative relations that are not dependent upon identity matrices like class and kinship relations, thereby fashioning heterogeneous consumption cultures

(Canniford and Shankar 2013; Chalmers Thomas et al. 2013; Kozinets 2002; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Seregina and Weijo 2017). The *communality* that emerges through such ludic consumption experiences has an emancipatory and liberatory hue compared to *sociality* that can come about in structural capacities that society offers, e.g., through daily work and related routinized social actions (O'Sullivan and Shankar 2019).

I propose to consider this emancipatory potential of market-mediated play alongside that of the public sphere (Brouwer and Asen 2010; Calhoun 2002; Habermas 1991). Habermas conceptualized the bourgeois public sphere, which was instantiated in public consumption contexts like coffeehouses, as a critical public space wherein citizens could discuss their concerns and articulate their social will. This led to a discursive empowerment of the citizen. Critiquing this model's emancipatory potential, critical public sphere scholarship has pointed out the exclusionary nature of such a dominant public sphere. The scholarship has illustrated how the model hierarchically patterns social positions, giving political credence to those with privilege in society, thereby adversely affecting pluralistic democracy and inclusion. Thus, there has been a call for a more expansive conception of the public sphere that can accommodate pluralistic discursive modes of engagement for greater inclusion. As discussed above, consumption contexts are now rife with creative means of practicing such civic engagement, market-mediated play being a specific case of interest to this study. However, we do not have a sufficient understanding of how the heterogeneity in market-mediated play is translating into pluralism in "emergent collectives" (Asen 2000) in the civic realm. We do have solid understanding of how ludic communal consumption experiences are shaped and sustained by the heterogeneous milieu of consumers (Belk and Costa 1998; Canniford and Shankar 2013; Seregina and Weijo 2017) and market actors (Arnould and Price 1993; Goulding et al. 2009; Hill et al. 2022; Kozinets et al.

2004). But to understand how market-mediated play can function as a creative mode of public dialogue, we need to investigate how pluralism and inclusion are enabled in a heterogeneous ludic consumption context for democratic engagement to come by in the first place.

And we need a critical lens for such an investigation given collective emancipatory pursuits in the marketplace have occasionally suffered from conflicts (Canniford and Shankar 2013; Seregina and Weijo 2017; Tumbat and Belk 2011) and disruptions (Kozinets et al. 2004; Woermann and Rokka 2015). Consumers and marketers have had to do the hard work of sustaining communal ethos in heterogeneous market-mediated play contexts (Chalmers Thomas et al. 2013; Kozinets et al. 2004; Seregina and Weijo 2017). A critical lens, that analyzes market-mediated play as a creative mode of public dialogue, must also discern how the heterogeneous milieu of consumers, market actors, and resources, constituting market-mediated play, could reduce discursive space by excluding certain consumers from circulating their discourse, thereby adversely affecting pluralism. Marketization and commercialization of market-mediated play have indeed led to manageable communal experiences (Arnould and Price 1993; Goulding et al. 2009; Kozinets 2002; Kozinets et al. 2004; Scott et al. 2017; Seregina and Weijo 2017), however, sometimes at the expense of exclusion or marginalization. Certain sections of consumers have had to face hostile play worlds, e.g., how the increasing commercialization of cosplay has reduced its capacity to function as a safe space for women gamers (Everett et al. 2017). In certain cases, when the marginalized consumer has attempted to resist and transform such hostility, power inflections in the market-mediated play context have encumbered these dynamics of resistance. For example, despite women's efforts to subvert gendered boundaries in video gaming consumption subcultures, masculine dominance has sustained gender-based marginalization (Drenten et al. 2022). Thus, these dynamics could potentially preclude certain

identities (in this case, women) from practicing civic engagement in the video gaming culture, as they do not have a safe and empowering space because of a lack of inclusion. Hence, we need to critically examine how market-mediated play can enable (or hinder) inclusion and pluralism for consumers to leverage market-mediated play for public dialogue.

Consumer studies have examined the effects of heterogeneity of consumer motivations, ideologies, market resources, and consumer identities on ludic experiences (Canniford and Shankar 2013; Chalmers Thomas et al. 2013; Kristiansen et al. 2022; Lindberg and Østergaard 2015; Seregina and Weijo 2017; Tumbat and Belk 2011; Woermann and Rokka 2015). Heterogeneous consumer ideologies can create tensions that adversely affect congenial ludic experiences (Kristiansen et al. 2022; Seregina and Weijo 2017; Tumbat and Belk 2011). Additionally, market resources, including material elements and the broader servicescape can either facilitate (Chalmers Thomas et al. 2013) or disrupt ludic communal experiences (Canniford and Shankar 2013; Lindberg and Østergaard 2015; Woermann and Rokka 2015). Thus, any construct that critically approaches market-mediated play contexts needs to account for the heterogeneous milieu of consumers, market actors, and resources integral to the ludic phenomenon. It is especially important that we analyse how such heterogeneity in market-mediated play can expand (or reduce) discursive space by including (or excluding) a plurality of social perspectives (Calhoun 2002; Young 2002). This is a vital requirement as a plurality of perspectives is integral to the concept of a public, according to the critical public sphere scholarship (Fraser 1990; Mouffe 2000), and a fair and just practice of democratic discourse depends on how inclusion is enabled (Asen 2002).

Market-mediated play can hold the potential for aforementioned “carnivalesque play” (Sicart 2014), wherein consumers are empowered to critically engage with macrostructural

realities. Further, as previously discussed, the autotelic nature of play offers immunity to carnivalesque critique as “play worlds buffer some of the influences of the broader society and offer formats for self-exploration" (Henricks 2015, 183). Thus, the market-mediated play context needs to enable carnivalesque play possibilities and immunity for such *democratic* civic engagement to be possible. I especially emphasize the democratic aspect of civic engagement because it accommodates an expansive discursive space, unlike the direct or indirect exclusions that might undemocratically restrict discursive circulation to that amongst privileged status affiliations (Asen 2000; Benhabib 1992; Fraser 1990; Squires 2002). However, it is also important to note that the exclusionary bourgeois public sphere (Habermas 1991) had emerged through discursive interactions in marketplace contexts (e.g., coffeehouses). These contexts constitute a heterogeneous system of citizens-as-consumers, market actors, and material elements which could have had an influence on the inclusionary (or exclusionary) nature of the public sphere. Similarly, any critical analysis of a market-mediated play context needs to examine how a heterogeneity of factors (consumers, market actors, resources, etc.) could expand (or reduce) discursive space by enabling (or disabling) pluralism and inclusivity, the latter being essential requirements for safe and immune carnivalesque playworlds. For example, when white supremacists brandish a market resource like the ‘Thor’s hammer’ in the Viking myth market (Södergren 2022), they justify xenophobia and neo-Nazi tropes, making such a ludic playwork unsafe for other racial groups. On the other hand, ludic resources could also act as affordances (Gibson 1977) that facilitate *inclusive* “action possibilities” (Hartson 2003). For example, market

actors continually customize ludic elements, like game characters, to augment inclusivity[44] and representation[45,46].

By emphasizing the above ludic adjustments of pluralism and inclusion, I also insist in revising our understandings of experience and interaction design in consumption contexts, which have largely found their home in consumer culture research through the concept of "servicescapes" (Sherry 1998). Servicescape is a "physical, material setting designed and built to shape consumption behavior" (Venkatraman and Nelson 2008, 1010). It encompasses design, ambient conditions, and consumer-consumer and consumer-producer interactions (Bitner 1992; Sherry 1998). Various market-mediated play studies have examined how the servicescape conditions ludic experiences (Hill et al. 2022; Kozinets et al. 2004; Woermann and Rokka 2015). I argue that market-mediated play settings do not only *shape* consumer behavior and associated interactions. They can also *enable* pluralism and inclusion which, in turn, can empower consumers to safely engage in carnivalesque play. Experience design and servicescape perspectives in market-mediated play largely underscore that marketplace sculpts consumers' ludic journeys. Carnivalesque play, on the other hand, necessitates players' political agencies, which can arise only if ludic conditions facilitate pluralism and inclusion.

This leads us to the second research question - How can market-mediated play enable (or hinder) pluralism and inclusion?

[44] https://www.geekwire.com/2018/dungeons-dragons-diversity-worlds-influential-rpg-turned-tables-inclusion/
[45] https://nerdist.com/article/dungeons-dragons-lgbt-representation/
[46] https://studybreaks.com/tvfilm/dungeons-and-dragons/

Manifesting a Civic Self Through Market-Mediated Play. Market-mediated play is exceptional in its ability to actualize transformations. It has supported marketers' and consumers' quests towards materializing consumers' fantasies (Belk and Costa 1998; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Södergren 2022), renewing their selves (Arnould and Price 1993; Celsi et al. 1993), and altering their emotions and behavior (Demirbag-Kaplan and Kaplan-Oz 2018; Hill et al. 2022; Orazi and van Laer 2022). However, as pointed out by Thompson and Üstüner (2015), the Goffman dramaturgical framework (Goffman 1978), which assumes a foundational authentic self, pervades several consumer culture studies. This also pertains to certain studies of ludic communal consumption experiences (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Celsi et al. 1993; Deighton 1992; Kozinets et al. 2004; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). These studies emphasize that consumers have a core self that they can either authenticate through market-mediated cultural scripts or incorporate performance roles into their core selves. Alternatively, Thompson and Üstüner (2015, 248), in the context of women's flat track roller derby, show how derby grrls undergo embodied *reflexive* transformations. These transformations are "experienced as a somatic revelation" when their habituated gender dispositions are challenged as they evolve into derby players. Thus, instead of the dramaturgical focus on tension between a core, authentic self and a performative role, the study shows how hybrid feminine subject positions are materially *manifested* through play. Such a reflexive awareness facilitates derby grrls' resistance practices and the players attain "personal empowerment and collective solidarity" (Thompson and Üstüner 2015, 254).

I concur with their assertion that ludic performances through market-mediated play can indeed induce reflexive transformations (Demirbag-Kaplan and Kaplan-Oz 2018; Lindberg and Østergaard 2015; Orazi and van Laer 2022; Södergren 2022; Thompson and Üstüner 2015).

However, I extend their argument by arguing that ludic performances through market-mediated play can also lead to reflexive production of a *civic* self when market-mediated play is utilized as a creative platform for civic engagement. Players can enact ludic performances that reflexively transform them into citizens who engage in public dialogue. Thus, market-mediated play can constitute "reflective democracy" (Goodin 2003) by enabling one to reflexively engage with one's political situatedness, value systems, and associational relationships. For example, the Viking myth serves as a "ludic raw material for hedonic playwork" (Södergren 2022, 457), resulting in reflections upon historical wrongdoings of white supremacists. I assert that further investigations of such *meso-level* manifestations of reflexivity through a conceptual lens will help operationalize the effect of such ludic civic engagement. Mapping such reflexive transformations, through such a lens, will help us make sense of the "consequences" (Bieger 2020; Dewey 1954) of public dialogue through market-mediated play.

However, we need a critical lens to study such market-mediated play contexts of reflexive transformations. Different logics in the consumption context could hinder reflexivity, impeding transformations, or yielding undesirable transformations (Kristiansen et al. 2022; Lindberg and Mossberg 2019; Tumbat and Belk 2011). Despite market-mediated play's capacity for meso-level production of communality and solidarity (Arnould and Price 1993; Celsi et al. 1993; Kozinets 2002; Seregina and Weijo 2017), the transition to reflexive transformation as democratic citizens engaging in public dialogue might not come by. Market actors can structure market-mediated play in a manner that inculcates regulation and competition (O'Sullivan and Shankar 2019; Tumbat and Belk 2011), hindering the transformative potential of play. Further, marketplace structures could replace public dialogue, that entails reflexive transformations, with sensationalism and commodification.

Thus, it is crucial to temper the above transformative possibilities in the civic system of market-mediated play with pragmatist possibilities in the marketplace. A critical examination will aid the analysis of the boundaries of emergent publics in market-mediated play contexts and help us understand how reflexive transformations can be facilitated (or thwarted). Consumer studies have uncovered the transformative potential of market-mediated play (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Celsi et al. 1993; Demirbag-Kaplan and Kaplan-Oz 2018; Hill et al. 2022; Kozinets et al. 2004; Lindberg and Østergaard 2015; Orazi and van Laer 2022; Södergren 2022; Ulusoy 2016). Market-mediated play facilitates materialization of consumers' imaginations (Demirbag-Kaplan and Kaplan-Oz 2018; Kozinets 2002), fantasies (Belk and Costa 1998; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), and also enables self-reflection (Orazi and van Laer 2022; Södergren 2022; Thompson and Üstüner 2015; Ulusoy 2016). Consumer research has highlighted various factors that can facilitate or hinder consumer transformations, for example, servicescape design (Gopaldas, Carnevale, et al. 2021; Gopaldas, Siebert, et al. 2021), atmospheres (Hill et al. 2022), and material elements (Belk and Costa 1998). A critical lens that examines market-mediated play as a creative mode of public dialogue will need to account for such transformations as reflexive production of the civic self.

Reflexive transformations through public dialogue in market-mediated play contexts can entail reflection upon one's values, beliefs systems, and political positionality.When we envisage market-mediated play contexts as sites of public dialogue, we can explore the resulting self-transformations of a different nature – beyond those of renewal of self and communal identities (Arnould and Price 1993; Celsi et al. 1993) to production of a civic self. As previously discussed, play can serve as a creative mode of civic engagement in the cultural public sphere (McGuigan 2005). It helps communicate complex macrostructural themes in an active and engaging manner.

More importantly, play can aid in the creation of embodied knowledge of social perspectives (Young 2002). Belk and Costa (1998) asserted how consumers can create alternative ludic realities for self-transformation. The self-transformation that emerges through the enactment of Mountain Man myth, in their study, involves consumers mimicking quotidian life behaviors, masculine archetypes by donning ludic resources like the mountain man clothing, and imagining the American mythology's values of freedom, material achievement, and independence. Consumers contrive their ludic experience to resemble folk heroic outsider status and, thus, transform themselves through "pseudomarginalization" (Belk and Costa 1998, 235). However, these ludic experiences did not lead to critical reflections upon societal conditions, say of the American mythology's emphasis on material achievement that ultimately led to the current capitalist system, masculine archetype's vestiges of toxic masculinity, and negative values of freedom that permeate the current neoliberal regime (Brown 2019). However, there are instances when ludic experiences can trigger critical reflection. Södergren (2022) illustrates how Viking myth-making evokes collective guilt when nostalgic ludic enactments by consumers transform into collective guilt recognition of historical wrongdoings marked by colonialism, racism, and toxic masculinity.

Thus, a market-mediated play context can either function as a "spectacle" (Kozinets et al. 2004), wherein consumers engage in pursuits of ludic pleasure and uncritical self-transformations or as an "interactive festival" (Woermann 2017) wherein reflexive transformations are triggered. In the case of Belk and Costa's (1998) study, consumers only dramatized the differences between their ordinary selves and their mythic re-enactments. Whereas, in Södergren's (2022) study, consumers gradually de-emphasized the Viking myth spectacle and reflexively transformed into citizens emphasizing the resolution of ideological and

political disconformities between their beliefs and the myth's historical meanings. Thus, a critical examination of market-mediated play's potential for public dialogue needs to account for the dimension of reflexive transformations to examine how civic engagement manifests in its consequences.

This leads us to the third research question - How can market-mediated play facilitate (or thwart) reflexive transformation of consumers into civic subjects?

Next, I investigate a market-mediated play context to empirically examine the following three research questions: How does the *structure* of market-mediated play create conditions for public dialogue? How can market-mediated play enable (or hinder) *pluralism and inclusion*? How can market-mediated play facilitate (or thwart) *reflexive transformation* of consumers into civic subjects?

RESEARCH CONTEXT – SLAM CULTURE

I propose slam culture as a relevant market-mediated play context for this thesis' empirical investigation. Analyzing 'slam' as a marketplace culture (Arnould and Thompson 2005) will help us contextualize the above theoretical analysis and answer the above research questions. Below, I present a historicized account of slam culture.

Historicizing Slam

Slams are performance competitions. The two most prominent types are poetry and story slams. The earlier of the two, slam poetry, was founded in 1986 by a Chicago construction worker, Marc Kelly Smith, in pursuit of a participatory art culture of poetry for the non-traditional audience of blue-collar workers like himself. Slams have been hailed as a social revolution (Smith 2003) for standing against the exclusive, dominant, and elitist academic literary culture. Slams created a space for those underrepresented or 'mis'representated by the dominant institution of academia and its scholars, empowering the non-elite and marginalized to perform their own narratives. The culture of slam helped "poets and performance artists to address the modern human condition by bringing to life (and the spotlight) personal, political, social, and spiritual concerns while knocking the socks off an audience through the artful and entertaining application of performance" (Smith and Kraynak 2009). Similarly, story slams are storytelling competitions which adopted a similar competitive structure of poetry slams and made their way into the mainstream marketplace culture through The Moth's first "StorySLAM" in 2000 at New York[47]. 'The Moth' is a not-for-profit storytelling organization, founded in New York in 1997 by novelist and poet George Dawes Green[48]. The Moth's StorySLAMs are "community-focused, open-mic storytelling competitions in which anyone can share a five-minute story on the night's theme."[49] Apart from The Moth's mainstream StorySLAMs, there are various grassroots-level, local story slams that happen in multiple locations around the world. My study investigates both commercially embedded The Moth StorySLAMs and local story slams that happen in a city located in the United States.

[47] https://www.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=d6701a30c18946afb2b16cc58de121bf
[48] https://web.archive.org/web/20100329233748/http://www.themoth.org/about
[49] https://themoth.org/about-moth-events

Slam culture's rise in recent history can be understood as a cultural reflection of macrostructural shifts. For instance, Bernstein (1998, 336) asserts that "as print culture's dominance abates in the swirling complexity of postmodernity, there has been a resurgence of serious attention to oral and performative literatures, with a concomitant imaginative refiguring of communities." Accordingly, slam culture's antecedents could be traced to oral traditions and participatory folk cultures like the Homeric epics and Greek dramatists, and poetic joust cultures like Japan's haiku contests and Jamaican dub poets (Smith and Kraynak 2009). The late 20th century urban slam culture, starting with Marc's poetry slam initiative and The Moth's StorySLAMs, had a similar "grassroots infrastructure" (Glazner 2012), but it has gradually emplaced itself in marketplace institutions[50]. For example, poetry slam and hip hop have merged to create commercial spoken word crossovers like HBO's *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* series (2002-2007). Additionally, The Moth's StorySLAMs have ventured into mainstream consumer culture by reaching large audiences through monthly live StorySLAMs that, currently, take place in 28 cities around the world[51]. Thus, it is imperative that this contemporary evolution of slam culture in the marketplace be investigated through a market-focused lens to excavate the emerging meanings of such play cultures under the current dominant cultural and political themes. Such an investigation can also help us discern how such market-mediated play contexts can (or cannot) function as creative modes of public dialogue for consumers, as cultural actors, to enact their political agencies.

Before I delve into the analytical treatise, I will now demonstrate the relevance of the empirical context by explicating how slam culture qualifies as a market-mediated play context

[50] https://www.nytimes.com/1999/05/02/arts/theater-to-fill-a-club-theres-nothing-like-a-story.html
[51] https://themoth.org/share-your-story/at-a-live-event

and how it can help us answer each of the three research questions. Firstly, slams have a *structured play* format as they are performance competitions with defined rules and goals. Secondly, the ethos of *pluralism and democratic commitment* undergirds slam culture with its explicit norms of promoting inclusion. Lastly, slams are historically rooted in a participatory ludic culture wherein civic engagement transpires, possessing the potential for *reflexive transformations* to occur.

A Market-Mediated Play Culture

Proponents of slam culture, like Marc Kelly Smith, have accorded it with a ludic symbolism that harmonizes with other ludic contexts like "carnival, pageant,…con game, boxing match" (Smith and Kraynak 2009, 3), and "…playground, sports arena, a burlesque show…" (Smith and Kraynak 2009, 5). Marc tapped into the structural benefits of competitive play as a "theatrical device for attention" (Smith and Kraynak 2009) and inculcated it in slam poetry to engage the performers and audience in the practice of "competitive argumentation" (Somers-Willett 2009, 14). This was done to counteract the dominant traditional, academic open-mic poetry readings wherein upper-class elites would solipsistically read their obtuse prose for disengaged audiences.[52] Thus, the structure of slam as a competition accorded authority to the audience members, as judges of performances, establishing grounds for public critique and "saturating the audience with power" (Glazner 2012, 17). The format of slam also inculcated a visceral exchange amongst the participants and audience members, challenging discursive norms

[52] http://poetrypreservation.org/slams-origins

of decorum typical to traditional poetry reading that expected quietude as codified demeanor from the audience (Somers-Willett 2009). Slam's principles and format have been so culturally significant that it has been included as a literary genre in college curricula (Smith and Kraynak 2009). In a slam format, Marc claims, "…you don't sit at a table with a text in front of your down-focused eyes following along as the poet drips and drabs his words. You lock your line of sight on the poet and tune in to what she's saying and how you're hearing it."[53] There is an "interactive immediacy" (Bernstein 1998) in slams, particularly, due to its format that privileges the participation of the audience equally with that of the performer.

Aligning with the critical public sphere scholarship's assertion that creative modes of public dialogue (Jacobs 2012; McGuigan 2005) strengthen participatory parity (Fraser 1990; Young 2002), we see how a competitive structure to performance poetry, through slams, enabled an expansive conception of 'discourse' (Finnegan and Kang 2004), encapsulating performances (Pezzullo 2003) and visceral engagement (Brouwer 2006). This shifted the locus of power from the performer as the main character to an audience holding public critique. Thus, the slam format enabled certain structural capacities (of competition) that, in turn, affected power inflections and, thereby, enhanced its capabilities as a creative mode of participatory public dialogue. This demonstrates why the dimension of 'structured play' is integral to slam culture for analytical investigation of its role in civic engagement.

The Moth's StorySLAM format was conceptualized in 2000 by Jenifer Hixon, a senior director at the non-profit institution, The Moth. Prior to that, The Moth used to mainly host live storytelling events, namely 'Mainstage', which are curated events featuring storytellers trained

[53] https://blog.bestamericanpoetry.com/the_best_american_poetry/2015/05/marc-kelly-smith-roots-philosophies-of-slam.html

by The Moth directors[49]. The institution came up with the slam format so that more people could tell stories, with the intent of democratizing participation: "the show was a competition, but moreover a community where anyone could share a 5 min story" (Bowles et al. 2022, 291). The structuring of live storytelling events into a slam format created "uncontrolled environments" with "…a sort of jukebox feeling: what story will be next?" (Bowles et al. 2022, 19), as the stories weren't worked upon by The Moth directors prior to the slams (unlike Mainstage events). This is the aspect of unpredictability which is typical in ludic forms of play (Caillois 1958/2001; Huizinga 1949; Sicart 2014). Thereafter, StorySLAMs remarkably shaped into a highly engaging market-mediated play context. As explained by Jenifer, "a culture grew around what happened in the room...we started off simply wanting to hear the stories, but we also got hooked on the electricity between tellers and listeners" (Bowles et al. 2022, 19).

The usual format of this study's core research context, story slams, is as follows. Participants sign up to tell a 5-minute story on a pre-announced theme. The host of the slam randomly picks the names, one by one, and storytellers take the stage. Judging teams are recruited from the audience and they score the ten storytellers of the slam, after each storyteller's performance. At the end of the slam, the tally reveals the winner. This is the typical format of The Moth StorySLAM. My research context also consisted of local story slams which had different variations in their rules and format, which as we shall see in findings, produce different logics and public dialogue potential. Each story slam usually produces a winner. When it comes to The Moth StorySLAM, after ten StorySLAMs in a city, the ten winners face off one another in an annual GrandSLAM Championship.[54] Evidently, slam's principles and format, including its rules and goals, are integral to its market-mediated play context. It is, therefore, necessary to

[54] https://themoth.org/share-your-story/at-a-live-event

analyze how these structural elements configure as play architecture in a market-mediated play context and affect prospects of public dialogue.

Slams' Democratic Commitment

Slam culture has embraced a mosaic of diversity, not only by expanding the conception of performance discourse to play formats, but also by inculcating democratic ideals of pluralism and representation. In the late 1980s, it began with Marc creating poetry slam as a welcoming platform to include a diversity of performing artists (primarily working class, blue-collar citizens like him) that the intellectually privileged poetry reading circles of academia had excluded (Smith 2003). This development confirms the critical public scholarship's assertion that "public spheres are not only arenas for the formation of discursive opinion but are also arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities" (Fraser 1990). Slam culture emerged as a platform for the marginalized identities (in this case, the working class) to participate in poetic ludic engagement in market-mediated contexts like barrooms and cabarets of working-class neighborhoods (Somers-Willett 2009), thereby incorporating democratic ideals of class-inclusivity. Fraser (1992, 122) asserts that "arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public." Slam culture was one such ludic arrangement of "representative democracy" (Somers-Willett 2009) that pluralized creative modes of discourse in the cultural public sphere (McGuigan 2005) against the then dominating literary public sphere of academia.

Hailed as a “social revolution” (Smith 2003), slam culture was preceded by a rise in “social consciousness” owing to macrostructural shifts of the post-World War era that propelled the countercultural 1950s Beat Generation (American social and literary movement) and the 1960s Hippies era (Smith 2003). Both movements rejected mainstream American values and were artful spiritual quests of exploration and political critique. These changes were also in response to the then academic corollaries of New Criticism, a movement in literary theory, that paid overt attention to the literary ‘text’ or art, its form and meaning, and decentered the artist or author (Sontag 1994). New Criticism, thus, dehistoricized the text/art and elided the sociocultural influences of the artist/author (Matterson 2006; Wellek 1978). This gave way to academia “employing an objective, analytic method for literary texts” and this development was considered as “one more symptom of the university's capitulation to the capitalist-military-industrial- technological complex” (Graff 1974, 72–73). The anti-historical bias of New Criticism, with its skewed “emphasis on rigour and objectivity,” “initiated the professionalization and formalization of literary criticism as a discipline” (Matterson 2006). Thus, literary circles, like that of poetry readings, became elite intellectual undertakings of interpretation and analysis. They privileged a canon of literary styles and institutionally powered literary figures, rendering them as the taste of the few than that of the general populace (Smith 2003). The postmodern movement, Beats Generation, was resistant to these developments, and rebelled against objectivity and academic formalism. Its notable literary figures included Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and Jack Kerouac, who would occasionally perform in bars in New York City’s Greenwich Village, constituting the Bohemian hippie culture of the 1960s (Banes 1993; Beard and Berlowitz 1993). Women beat poets like Carolyn Cassady and African American poets like Amiri Baraka provided distinctive gender and racial perspectives to the movement. Racial

solidarity and working-class rebellion to bourgeois classes were integral to the Beat Generation. However, while the Beats and Hippie movements were countercultural, dissident (Bernstein 1998) and anti-establishment (Glazner 2012), slam culture is not so. It is assimilative. Slam culture is like these movements in its quest to enhance pluralistic modes of engagement and enable democratic participatory parity. However, it has focused upon bringing "together divergent communities of people, not drop out from society to form a hipster elite as the early Beats did" (Smith and Kraynak 2009, 20). This can be witnessed in the commercial crossovers of poetry slam into spoken word and hip hop (Glazner 2012; Somers-Willett 2009) and The Moth's mainstream reach through its StorySLAMs.

The Moth's mission is to "celebrate the diversity and the commonality of human experience" (Bowles et al. 2022, 21) and bring diverse personal narratives into public dialogue (Bowles et al. 2022, 6). The institution touts its democratic commitment and ethos of pluralism by offering live storytelling events, StorySLAMs, as "community-focused, open-mic"[49] market-mediated play contexts. Thus, slam culture is embedded in the mainstream consumer culture and is a crucial context to analyze how its market embeddedness can affect its potential to serve as a platform for public dialogue. Pluralism and inclusion can be evidenced in story slams' historical genesis and contemporary mission statements (of The Moth and various other local story slams analyzed in the study), thereby qualifying slam culture as a relevant context for putting the research questions into empirical action.

Political Reflexivity Through Slam

Marc proclaims that slam culture is a contemporary manifestation of traditional folk cultures, including poetic jousts like Japan's haiku contests, Spain's public poetic jousts ('Justas Literarias'), dramatist Greeks constituting the Theatre of Dionysus, and Jamaican dub poetry (Smith and Kraynak 2009). However, slam culture does not solely represent contemporary ludic expressions of art performances. It also provides a crucial civic edge in modern consumer culture. As discussed earlier, play forms have ubiquitously reflected dominant cultural themes. Accordingly, slam's history demonstrates how its ludic structure has inspired "deep play" (Ackerman 2011) that encompasses contemporary cultural politics. For example, Black and Latino young adults from underprivileged neighborhoods engaged in slam poetry and steered the social revolution of hip-hop (Smith and Kraynak 2009). The 1998 documentary *SlamNation* chronicles the experiences of young Black artists competing in the 1996 National Poetry Slam who, through their slam performances, illuminated the painful history of Black identity in the United States. Similarly, the 1999 film, *Slam,* narrates an account of a young Black man, from an underprivileged social background, who performs in poetry slams to discursively address the issue of black males suffering under the United States criminal justice system. Additionally, slams have been treated as creative platforms to discursively engage with contemporary geopolitical phenomena. For example, a winner of an international slam brought the slam culture to Croatia, one of the emerging democracies of Eastern Europe, to provide a forum for citizens to express "their newfound freedom" (Smith 2003, 202). Thus, apart from its entertainment and ludic value, slam culture has also resulted in the reflexive production of civic selves.

Slams have been discussed as public arenas inducing political reflexivity. In their discussion about the political dimension of slam cultures, Somers-Willett (2009, 72) claims that "proclamations of marginalized identities undoubtedly attract slam audiences, who may see

poetry slams not only as literary or performative but ultimately as political events." Dolan (2006, 2005) studies the slam poetry context of *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry Jam on Broadway* and asserts that the show became "a vehicle for radical democratic citizenship" (Dolan 2006, 167). The author observes how slam performances were helping the participants in "making palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better, were the goals of social justice achieved" (Dolan 2006, 165). Thus, the context of slam culture has indeed demonstrated its potential to reflexively produce a civic self. The context also offers an important pragmatic setting that counters the dramaturgical perspective of performance in social sciences, including consumer studies (Deighton 1992; Goffman 1978). The dramaturgical perspective assumes a foundational core self that *performs* roles. The context of slam culture illuminates how ludic performance enactments accomplish civic imagination (Jenkins et al. 2020), reflexively *transforming* participants into citizens.

However, Dolan's (2006, 2005) case study leaves a gap in understanding how the marketplace context and associated consumption elements (including heterogeneous consumers, market actors, market resources, etc.), that increasingly pervade the modern slam culture, can affect its civic potential for reflexive transformations. Slam's commercial crossovers and related intensification of mainstream consumer culture could present disruptive conditions, thereby affecting political solidarity initiatives by slam participants who perform as "agentic social actors" (O'Sullivan and Shankar 2019). This study addresses that gap to inform how market-mediated play influences its potential for reflexive transformations. The Moth is an internationally recognized cultural institution, submerged in a relatively more marketized and commercial environment than poetry slams and other local story slams. Thus, The Moth's StorySLAM is a useful context to analyze how reflexive transformations are affected in

commercially embedded market-mediated play contexts vis-à-vis local story slams. A critical analysis of a ludic cultural system like story slam can also commence a genre of studies to explore other similar market-mediated play contexts that could serve such civic purposes.

Next, I outline the research methodology. I summarize the appropriateness of the data collection methods, how the chosen methods help answer the research questions, and how data analysis was executed.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

The research design comprises of the following research methods. Table 1 summarizes the research methods used in the study.

In-Depth Interviews. A qualitative interview is a text that represents "the contextualized personal expressions of an individual consumer" (Arnold and Fischer 1994, 61). The reasons behind selecting qualitative interviewing as an integral research method for this study are threefold. First, to understand how the structural elements of market-mediated play mediate (or hinder) public dialogue, we need to examine consumers' phenomenological experiences of (dis)empowerment in deploying ludic experiences through market-mediated play as a discursive tool. Second, to understand the democratic commitment of market-mediated play context, we need to examine how consumers experience pluralism and inclusivity for safe and immune

discursive acts. Third, to make sense of how reflexive transformations manifest in market-mediated play contexts of public dialogue, we need to scrutinize consumers' narratives pertaining to evolution in their values, belief systems, and political positions. Thus in-depth, qualitative interviews addressed the three research questions. I conducted both ethnographic interviews, which capture in-situ collective shared perspectives and experiences of story slam participants (during participant observation), and phenomenological interviews (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989) that captured participants' individual lifeworlds, lived experiences and perspectives. For the latter, the long interview (McCracken 1988) method was befitting. The interview design captured analytic categories informed by the theoretical examination and cultural categories informed by my immersion in the story slam context. This was followed by the development of a thorough questionnaire consisting of grand-tour biographical questions (historical backgrounds, cultural affiliations, etc.) and floating prompts, sprinkled with probes, wherever necessary. I chose interviewees across ages, competence levels (expert story slam participants vs. novices), identity categories (gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, etc.), and interest (avid story slam participant vs. disinterested/disgruntled participant) to capture multilayered implications (see table 2). Initially, I recruited interviewees by introducing myself in the story slams (The Moth storySLAM and local story slams), providing my email address to interested participants and following up with them for interviews. Later, via snowball sampling, I asked the recruited research participants to identify other potential research subjects of interest. Constant comparison (Strauss and Corbin 1998) across participants' narratives and emerging themes resulted in a focused sampling procedure, called "purposive sampling" (Lincoln and Guba 1985). When analytical themes started emerging, I tactically recruited participants to select for similar cases for comparison and divergent cases for contradiction, resulting in "theoretical sampling" (Strauss

and Corbin 1998). Participants' anonymity has been respected by using pseudonyms. A total of 24 interviewees were approached and their interviews were conducted in participants' homes, cafes, university's library rooms, on videoconferencing platforms like Zoom, and one on phone call. Interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was achieved, i.e., until no novel emerging themes were identified after data analysis (Creswell 2007). The duration of interviews ranged from short, 5-10 minutes ethnographic interviews (during participant observation in story slams) to 45 minutes – 3.5 hours in-depth interviews. I also followed up with participants through emails, text messages, and social media (Facebook).

Participant Observation. Interviews provided perspectives *of* action. Participant observation, on the other hand, provided perspectives *in* action. This data collection method required me to immerse myself in story slam contexts by attending story slams in various participatory roles (storyteller, audience member, judging team member, and volunteer) and observe the structural aspects of market-mediated play, the heterogeneous milieu of consumptionscape elements (material elements, event space, ambient conditions), and interactions amongst story slam participants, institutional actors (story slam organizers, hosts). I took extensive fieldnotes, recording my personal experiences, thoughts, and reflexive orientation (my identity positions across gender, race, ethnicity, etc.). Participant observation was especially useful for this study because it revealed public dialogue, as it emerged, in different story slam ecologies (The Moth StorySLAM vs. local story slams) and helped me explore how consumers and institutional actors responded to one another in public dialogue. This complemented in-depth interviews in which consumers and institutional actors were only responding to me, the researcher.

Further, participant observation is essential when it comes to studying any context of structured play. Contemporary play scholars, like Sicart (2014, 106), have emphasized that any theory of play should be mindful about its context that "encompasses the social, cultural, technological, and physical situatedness of play and how objects are an integral part of what play is." The German word for play is "spiel" and "spielraum" stands for "room for play" (Conceição 2021). According to Woermann (2017), consumption sites can function as a "spielraum", i.e., an interactive assembly of material elements and spatiality that engage intercorporeality amongst consumers. Thus, to capture the "spielraum" in story slam context, i.e., the scope in which play happens, it was important for me to ethnographically immerse myself in story slams, observe non-human factors like rules, format, material objects, etc., and take fieldnotes on the civic intercorporeality of the context. Discursive engagement in slams occurs amongst a *collective* of consumers. Thus, *individual* interviews had to be complemented with participant observation amongst a *collective* of consumers. I participated in a total of 30 story slams, both in-person and virtual, pre-COVID-19 onset and after. I was a member of the target population I was researching (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993) and participated as a storyteller, volunteer, audience member, and judging team member. Positioning myself in multiple roles provided me with multidimensional perspectives of market-mediated play and helped me uncover varied interpretations of public dialogue.

Comparative Ethnography. Comparative ethnography is ethnographic research that "explicitly and intentionally builds an argument through the analysis of two or more cases by tacking back and forth between cases to identify either similarities or differences in the processes, meanings, concepts, or events across them in the service of broad theoretical

arguments" (Simmons and Smith 2019, 341–42). In the story slam context, I engage in a comparative ethnography that helps me examine the heterogeneity amongst different story slam cultures, i.e., The Moth StorySLAMs and local story slams. The heterogeneity amongst different story slam cultures is not restricted to phenomenological experiences and related behavioral patterns that consumers cultivate in different slam contexts. A postphenomenological analysis (Verbeek 2005) of play goes beyond the behavior of consumers and their dramaturgical performances (Goffman 1978; Ritzer 2000). It helps go beyond the usual emphasis on what players do (O'Sullivan and Shankar 2019) and play attitudes (Caillois 2001) to background effects of consumption contexts, non-human elements, and logics of the market. A comparative ethnography is, thus, useful as it can glean how different contextual configurations of play, resulting in heterogeneous webs "of consumers, "market-things" and marketers" (Cochoy 2021, 4), can impact civic engagement possibilities.

Hence, I undertake comparative ethnography to analyze heterogeneity across slam contexts, a meso-level heterogeneity beyond the pervasively analyzed micro-level heterogeneity within consumption collectives (Chalmers Thomas et al. 2013). In the initial stages of research, I realized that despite there being a commonality via the ludic terminology of 'story slams', story slams conducted by different institutions displayed a variation in, not only ludic themes of pleasure and communality, but also circulation of civic discourse. Thus, the architecture of play was instrumental in conveying not only different ludic meanings (Sicart 2014) but also in directing public dialogue. The rationale behind grouping of cases into two, i.e., The Moth StorySLAMs and local story slams (a total of three local story slams have been analyzed until now) in the same city, is that The Moth StorySLAMs are much more commercially pronounced, with a recognizable international brand (The Moth) supporting market logics compared to

slightly less commercial, grassroots hyperlocal story slams. Given that I am examining *market*-mediated play's potential for public dialogue, it is imperative that any pursuit of comparative ethnography demarcates cases primarily on the basis of marketplace embeddedness. The discernment of whether a market-mediated play context emerges as a civic engagement context can only be answered when looking at it in a relational manner, i.e., how its topography of public dialogue compares with that of other similar instances. The interpretations gleaned were multilayered because of the presence of both "complementary and discrepant data" (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994) emerging from each comparative case.

Other Media. Various other sources of data included documentaries and films, media coverage, and media assets (including social media profiles, social media pages, websites of story slam institutions, YouTube channels), as noted in table 1. These aided in understanding external portrayals of the general slam culture, as well as the specific story slam contexts, to unravel how meanings of civic engagement are embedded in the mediascapes and commercial media culture, in general. Further, media assets helped glean self-portrayals of story slam participants, story slam organizations, their branding, and associated institutional actors, to interpret how they filter public dialogue through these self-portrayals and the kinds of civic meanings they cultivate in the broader mediascape external to story slam events.

TABLE 1

SUMMARY OF DATA SOURCES

Description	Sources	Dataset	Purpose
Ethnographic fieldwork	Fieldwork at The Moth StorySLAMs (Total 17; in-person: 15, virtual: 2), local story slams (in-person: 13) between February 2020 and May 2023	106 double-spaced pages of fieldnotes	To understand the context (materials, event space, locations) of story slams, how participants respond to one another in public dialogue, how interpretations of public dialogue vary across multiple participatory roles (storyteller, audience member, volunteer, judging team member)
Long interviews	Story slam participants, audience members, institutional actors (organizers, hosts, co-producers), judging team members	24 interviewees, 1059 double-spaced pages of interview transcripts	To understand participants' lifeworlds, motivations to participate in story slams, whether and how they perform civic discourse through story slams, structural facilitators of and impediments to inclusivity and how transformations manifest as evolutions in consumers' beliefs, values, and political positionalities
Photography and videography	Photographs and videos recorded during story slams	147 photographs, 11 videos	Capturing architectural elements, ambience of story slams, material resources (rule placards, scoreboards etc.)
Films/Documentaries	*Slam* (1998): a drama film, *SlamNation* (1998): a documentary,	1 film, 1 documentary	Understanding the ethos of slam culture and its portrayal in commercial media
Media coverage	Mainstream media articles, local news webpages	20+ news articles and webpages	Understanding media's discourse on slam culture, institutional actors' preferences of brand portrayals for the broader audience
Media assets	Social media profiles, participants' personal websites, story slam	20+ social media profiles, 2 personal	Understanding how consumers, institutional actors and story slam

	podcasts (The Moth Radio Hour, local story slam podcast), YouTube story slam channels and participants' uploaded performance videos	websites, 2 podcast channels, 3+ YouTube channels, 20+ performance videos	organizations publicize themselves, key narratives emphasized during publicity, and civic messages portrayed, if any

TABLE 2

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Pseudonyms	**Age Range**	**Roles in story slams**	**Occupation**	**Ethnic identification**	**Gender Identification**	**Preferred Pronouns**	**Total annual net income**
Anne	31-40	Storyteller, Listener, Judging team member, Host	Editor	White	Female	She/her	$60,001 – 80,000
Avery	31-40	Storyteller, Listener, Judging team member, Organizer	Program Coordinator / Senior Lecturer	Mixed (Mexican & Filipina)	Trans-Female	They/Them or They/She	$60,001 – 80,000
Carl	41-50	Storyteller	Actor	Black	Male	He/him	$60,001 – 80,000
Chad	21-30	Storyteller, Listener, Judging team member, Organizer	State Employee (Disability Adjudicator)	White American	Male	He/him	$80,001 – 100,000

Chris	61-70	Storyteller, Listener, Judging team member, Host	Retired	Native American	Male	He/him	$40,001 – 60,000
Darryl	31-40	Storyteller, Host	Education	Black	Cisgender Male	He/him	$60,001 – 80,000
Dolores	21-30	Listener	Resident doctor	White	Female	She/her	$60,001 – 80,000
Duong	31-40	Storyteller, Judging team member	Physician	Vietnamese American	Male	He/him	More than $200,000
Earl	51-60	Storyteller, Organizer	Self-employed	White	Male	He/him	Prefer not to answer
Emily	41-50	Storyteller, Listener	Graduate student	White	Female	She/her	More than $200,000
Emma	31-40	Storyteller, Judging team member	Marketing	White	Female	She/her	Prefer not to answer
Evelyn	31-40	Storyteller	Math teacher	White	None	None	I don't know
Greg	41-50	Storyteller	Restorative impact coordinator	Black	Male	He/him	$40,001 – 60,000
Henry	51-60	Storyteller	Veterinarian	White-Eastern European	Male	He/him	More than $200,000
John	31-40	Storyteller, Listener, Judging team member	Actuary	White	Male	He/him	$125,001 - $200,000
Joon	21-30	Listener	student	Korean	Female	She/her	$80,001 – 100,000
Justin	61-70	Storyteller, Listener, Organizer	Writer, Performer, Private	Spanish-American	Male	He/him	$20,000 or less

			Teacher & Coach				
Karla	51-60	Storyteller, Listener, Judging team member	Producer, writer	White/Jewish	Female	She/her	$80,001 – 100,000
Margarita	31-40	Storyteller, Listener, Judging team member	Spanish tutor and writer	Latina	Female	She/her	Prefer not to answer
Mateo	41-50	Storyteller	Storyteller	Latin	Male	He/him	Prefer not to answer
Mike	61-70	Storyteller	Retired	White	Male	He/him	$80,001 – 100,000
Molly	31-40	Storyteller, Listener, Judging team member	Academic Program Manager	White	Female	She/her	$100,001 – 125,000
Ron	31-40	Storyteller, Organizer	Self-employed	White	Male	He/him	Prefer not to answer
Shawn	31-40	Storyteller, Listener, Judging team member, Host	Operations Manager	European American - White	Male	He/him	$80,001 – 100,000

Data Analysis

The research design was rooted in "naturalistic inquiry" (Lincoln and Guba 1985), i.e., the research field was not contrived by me, which suits experimental methodologies, but was a natural setting, making the research design more emergent rather than an a priori dictum. Initial stages of the research comprised of immersion into the social context of story slams, through participant observation, short ethnographic interviews (during story slams), and preliminary web scrutiny of story slams (story slam institutions' webpages, social media pages, websites and social media profiles of story slam participants, news articles, archived webpages, etc.). This initial immersion helped me make sense of the emergent phenomenon of civic engagement that is possible through a market-mediated play context like story slam. Gradually, I realized that ethnographic research will be a proper path for me to examine the social context. Further, I realized that the ethnographic endeavor should not only focus on the phenomenological experiences of consumers, i.e., what they feel, think, desire, and experience in the story slam context, but also what people do together and in what context. Thus, the focus pivoted towards sensemaking of the social world of story slams and not just the psychological worlds of individuals comprising it. I realized that my research could produce a practical cultural knowledge of market-mediated play contexts that can support public dialogue.

The emergent research design coincided with deeper engagement with the public sphere, play, and consumer studies. I observed the sociocultural phenomenon of market-mediated play, shared meanings and experiences of pluralism and inclusion by story slam participants, and how

transformations manifested in the context. Data analysis was focused around building interpretations from ethnographic data (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994).

First, to understand how the structure of play facilitates (or thwarts) conditions for public dialogue, I paid careful attention to how my interviewees utilized the structure of play in story slams, i.e., was their participation purely for fun and entertainment or were there motivations to have public dialogue through play? I also identified various market factors (material elements, event space, cultural context) that influenced how they approached story slams and the expectations they garnered of the culture of story slams with continued participation. When I noticed a few interviewees talking about their unfavorable experiences in story slams, I identified how various elements like rules, format, material elements, institutional actors' choices influenced these experiences. I also took fieldnotes corresponding to the type of logics I could identify, between story slam cases (The Moth StorySLAM vs. local story slams) to compare how different structures of play can condition public dialogue differently. Photographs were useful to visually compare cases and capture structural differences constituting each market-mediated play context.

Second, to understand how pluralism and inclusion were enabled or hindered, I paid careful attention to the presence of heterogeneity of consumers across a multitude of identity categories (gender, race, ethnicity, etc.). I assiduously followed story slam organizations' webpages, social media pages and other media assets to understand their rhetoric around democratic principles of pluralism and inclusion. Then, through in-depth interviews, I gauged how participants in the story slams of these organizations experienced these democratic realities in their respective consumption contexts. In my interviews with institutional actors like story slam organizers, I noted how they made attempts (if any) to work on these principles.

Photographs and videos helped me capture the consumptionscape in which story slams took place. The differences I noted in these geographical locations and venues motivated me to ask my participants whether and how vulnerable and (un)safe they felt while participating in these market-mediated play contexts. I compared the dissonance between institutional actors' pursuits of enforcing an inclusive consumptionscape and consumers' barriers to participating in the same. These comparisons helped me identify key factors behind such instances of dissonance.

Third, to understand how reflexive transformations are facilitated (or thwarted) in the story slam context, I focused on the points at which consumers transition into citizens. I initially saw glimpses of these transitions during my initial fieldwork, when storytellers would perform on political themes. Thereafter, I interviewed such participants and identified how they used the story slam context to have a public dialogue about the macrostructural realities that adversely affect them (e.g., racism, anti-immigrant policies). These narratives helped me tease out how their civic self manifests through play in the story slam context. And when it came to participants from privileged backgrounds, I tried to understand whether they experienced any shifts in their political values and beliefs, and explicitly asked them this during the interviews. To understand barriers to civic transformations of story slam participants, I analyzed how participants interpreted the ambience of each story slam and what factors in the market-mediated play context and communication by the story slam organizations influenced their interpretations. Different strands of interpretations came about that were divergently situated (facilitating and thwarting reflexive transformations) and I utilized my comparative ethnographic setup to tease out these divergences. Photographs complemented participants' narratives around how they interpreted The Moth StorySLAM versus local story slams' spaces, deepening the divergent interpretations alluded to earlier.

Data analysis was an emergent process (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Strauss and Corbin 1998). Preliminary themes were developed during the initial stages of analysis of interview transcripts, fieldnotes and were visited iteratively during the later stages. Theoretical sampling helped expand the themes and imbue them with subtleties of comparisons and contradictions (Creswell 2007). Back and forth journeys between data and theory revealed complementarities and disjunctures (Spiggle 1994). Constant comparisons (Strauss and Corbin 1998) between consumers' narratives and within narratives revealed particularities. Data analysis was iterative (Arnold and Fischer 1994; Spiggle 1994; Thompson 1997) and incorporated a hermeneutic movement (Thompson et al. 1989) between the generalized interpretations and specific data elements (Arnold and Fischer 1994). The hermeneutic maneuver comprising of part-to-whole iterations (Thompson 1997) helped contextualize participants' emic themes into etic perspectives. Open coding of interviews was followed by axial coding, i.e., identifying relationships between codes. The hermeneutically grounded interpretive framework (Thompson 1997) also assisted in deriving conceptual and marketing implications.

PATHWAYS FROM MARKET-MEDIATED PLAY TO PUBLIC DIALOGUE

Data analysis revealed four pathways (figure 1) from market-mediated play to public dialogue. These pathways illustrate how market-mediated play produces social experiences (figure 1, leftmost column) and parallel negotiations of pluralism and inclusion (figure 1, rightmost column), generating consumer transformations (figure 1, central column). The first two pathways reveal consumer transformations that enable creative public dialogue (figure 1, upper part). The first pathway illustrates how consumers leverage the competitive structure towards

representation alongside marketplace negotiations of pluralism, undergoing consumer transformations that empower them to performatively express their distinct cultural identity. The second pathway illustrates how the intimate quality of co-presence in market-mediated play, combined with marketplace actors' negotiation of inclusivity, produces consumer transformations involving consumers' revision of cultural beliefs.

In contrast, the other two pathways reveal consumer transformations that hinder public dialogue (figure 1, lower part). The third pathway illustrates how the competitive structure of market-mediated play, in combination with market logics inhibiting consumer diversity, produces consumer transformations. These transformations lead consumers to perform formulaically, thus suppressing their distinct cultural identity. The fourth pathway illustrates how market-mediated play's entertainment logic can combine with compromised inclusivity, causing consumers to conform their performances to make them less politically charged for market spectacles. The last two pathways, thus, shape market-mediated play into a discursive regime – a governing logic of performative conduct. The data presented in Table 3 provides a comprehensive overview of the trajectory followed by a subset of consumers through various pathways. It illustrates how market-mediated play either facilitates or thwarts public dialogue.

FIGURE 1

MARKET-MEDIATED PLAY TO PUBLIC DIALOGUE: A FRAMEWORK

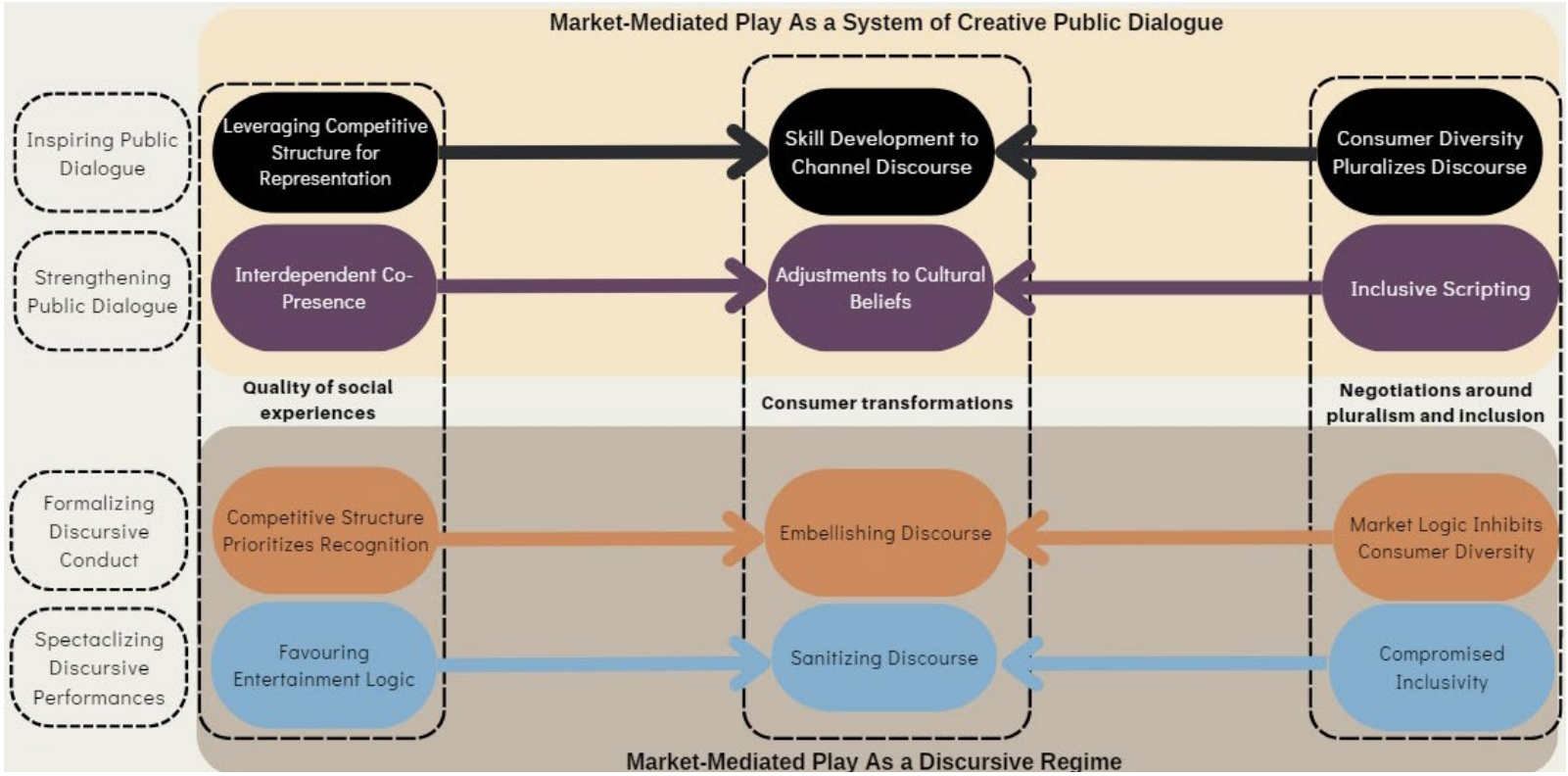


TABLE 3

ADDITIONAL DATA EXCERPTS

	Pathways	Quality of Social Experiences	Consumer Transformations	Negotiations Around Pluralism and Inclusion
Market-Mediated Play as a System of Creative Public Dialogue	Pathway 1 (Inspiring Public Dialogue)	Leveraging Competitive Structure for Representation	Skill Development to Channel Discourse	Consumer Diversity Pluralizes Discourse
		Margarita: I do look forward to win, just because it's mostly men who won. And I'm like, "Come on, woman. We got to be there representing." Because the Grand Slam, I think last year, we only have one woman, and most of them were men. And they also, like, have a winner.	Margarita: Something that I'm doing lately is recording myself because sometimes I feel, like, when I'm on the stage, the tone of my voice, it really changes the perspective. And because I kind of practice before I go. And I can be just, like, in a calm voice, and I can listen to myself and say, "Mm, maybe if I change this," or, "If I change that, it's gonna be a little bit more interesting to the audience." And so that's, like, a new tool that I'm using. And once I'm there, I try to remember...three points or five, and sometimes I'm really counting them, "Okay. I talk about this. I talk about this. I talk about...and I need to have a conclusion."	Margarita: And actually, when I had started going... and the reason I decided, okay. I'm going to do it, is because one Guatemalan man who's actually...I think he's from Chicago, he is a very master in the storytelling. But he has very big accent. And when I hear him on the stage, I was like, "Okay. If he do it, I can do it." Because it's a strong accent, you know? He has a strong accent. And people laughed, and people loved him.
		Interdependent Co-Presence	Adjustments to Cultural Beliefs	Inclusive Scripting

	Pathway 2 (Strengthening Public Dialogue)	Henry: ...You're selecting to be in the presence of people with other views, and you also have the opportunity to make decisions, "Okay, what is it that I want to say, and what do I want to communicate when I get up there?..I really do feel as if The Moth in particular is successful in creating a universally supportive environment...you can see it on the stage afterwards when people go up and...to the extent that when people have told a great story, then...everybody is supportive of them. If people tank, because I've seen a few people just absolutely flame out, and those people get hugged, and they're handshaked, and supported maybe more than anybody else.	Henry: And one of the things that...there was a story that to this day I could not reproduce the words, you know, of what the story was all about. But it made an amazing impression on me, about a woman who was coming out as transgender. And that story really made me feel and really made me understand. And I think I found that to be very endearing.	Henry: Well, one of the things that The Moth is absolutely adamant about, one of their cornerstones is community, and supportive, and being absolutely non-judgmental. And I feel as if, you know, just by their very nature of how they market, how they advertise, you know, in their own...Public Radio, and things like that, they select for that type of participant in that part, that type of audience. And every host at the beginning of the evening will speak to...there will be no stories that are divisive, that are racist, that are sexist, that are phobic in any way, shape, or form. And every host makes a really big point about saying, "If you think your story might be any of those things, then it probably is. And save it. And just don't tell that story.
Market-Mediated Play as a Discursive Regime	Pathway 3 (Formalizing Discursive Conduct)	Competitive Structure Prioritizes Recognition	Embellishing Discourse	Market Logic Inhibits Consumer Diversity
		Avery: I've seen storytellers just, like, sit and count the scores and everything while people are telling a story, so they're not listening, they're distracted by the scoreboard... Actually, there was one time when we were calculating scores, and we asked all 10 storytellers together on stage, one of the people was just, like, "Liz won." And I was like, "Well, I still need to count all the scores." And she's like, "No, Liz won." And…she was also very angry about it because apparently she had been paying very close attention to the scores...there are people who...just wanna get to the GrandSLAM because that's a chance to be on the podcast and they want to be heard on the podcast.	Avery: Well, one of the things that I see as a push/pull with it being a competition is that sometimes I feel like the stories lose their authenticity. For me, personally, as someone who just loves listening to stories, who, you know, doesn't approach it as a competition, I look more for authentic vulnerability like human connection.	Avery: Because I think that's a lot of the conversation, it ends up being like the urban versus rural, who do we choose to engage in? From an economic standpoint, they [[The Moth]] want to engage in the urban because more people, more attendance. But then we do lose the rural voice.
		Favouring Entertainment Logic	Sanitizing Discourse	Compromised Inclusivity

	Pathway 4 (Spectaclizing Discursive Performances)	Chad: Story slams are theatrical...if we are creating this accessible artwork space but only presenting a very narrow set of that space... Like if we're only serving regulars, then that connection is just a feedback loop...I would like the space to not just be a space for white yuppies, right, who have a salary job where they can go to The Moth, spend a little money get in, have fun on a Monday night and rock into work 30 minutes later. I'm not opposed to those people showing up but I think that they already have that space. And so I think that's sort of the next step beyond...So it's not just being a counterpoint to The Moth. It's like, you know, if this is about connection, then how can we use this thing to make connections that would not exist if the thing did not exist?	Chad: While I'm sure everyone at the moth agrees with the statement "Black Lives Matter" they are not pushing for or against change, they are commodifying stories for a content machine.	Chad: One idea though, at the time, that got shut down because of COVID, but we had actually already started planning it and I think we even had a date was like an abortion stories event. And that was going to be a controlled event, right? Like, people tell us their stories in advance so they can come. But there was also arguably, a safety element to that because anti-abortion political presence is not just existent and militant, but it is proactive in how it seeks out spaces that are pro-abortion, right? Like they insert themselves in the space.

Inspiring Public Dialogue

Leveraging Competitive Structure for Representation. The competitive format in story slams resulted in a hierarchy of consumer positions (i.e., a winner, runner-up, lowest scorer, etc.). I found that consumers leveraged this competitive structure for identity representation through their discursive performances. Mateo, a regular story slam participant and winner, utilizes story slams to share his stories about his experiences of living in the US as an undocumented immigrant (figure 2). Winning in story slams helps him gain recognition for his Latino and immigrant identity and helps him promote his show that foregrounds immigrant's narratives:

> Mateo: I think what happens with the wins is that it helps me to get people's attention. You know, it's not the same thing as saying, like, "Mateo Lopez went to the StorySLAM and told a story one time, than Mateo Lopez won 70 slams." People were like, "What?" You know, people paid more attention to me. So it helps bring a little bit more attention to the show...people pay more attention to what I do, and it helps me bring more attention to the immigration show, which is now my main focus.

Similar accounts (table 3) show how the competitive structure of slams inspired consumers to performatively discuss macrostructural influences (O'Sullivan and Shankar 2019) that impinge upon them. Thus, consumers can leverage market-mediated play's competitive

structure to pursue performative success and audience captivation not only out of an exhibitionistic motive (Kozinets et al. 2004) but also to advance public dialogue.

FIGURE 2

MATEO, A PREVIOUSLY UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANT IN THE USA, PERFORMS AT THE MOTH, WEARING A HOODIE THAT READS, "IMMIGRATION STORIES"

Consumer Diversity Pluralizes Discourse. Our data also revealed the parallel negotiation done by market actors to enfold a diversity of perspectives within the market-mediated play context towards a more democratic public dialogue. Market actors play a key role in facilitating consumer diversity to expand the discursive space, i.e., increasing the possibility for a diversity of identities (across race, gender, etc.) to deliver discursive performances. Darryl laments that other story slams in the city spatially limit pluralistic participation ("So for me as a black man… I just see two gentrified neighborhoods"). To combat the same, as a co-organizer of a local story slam, Darryl partners with different market actors (city's local library offering

grants, cafes offering sponsorship) to conduct his slam in different locations within the same city (figure 3):

> Darryl: I think it's really important that we move around the city so that we can be accessible to people who don't always have the opportunity to do slam…So just making sure that it moves so that we can connect it with more people...they're building an African American Excellence Center. So that might be a really great place to, like, host the story slam and it might bring more people of color out to give it a shot. So that's what I'm hoping. Like, trying to do venues like that where you can pull people out of their shell and get them to participate in dialogue. That's what I think story slams are. It's just an opportunity for a community to dialogue with themselves, with each other.

FIGURE 3

LOCAL STORY SLAMS CONDUCTED IN DIFFERENT LOCATIONS

This tactic makes the slam accessible to a heterogeneous set of consumers even as it enfolds a plurality of perspectives to facilitate consumers' discursive engagement. Thus, comparative ethnography shows how partnering with market actors in the city could lead the usual non-market-mediated local story slam, spearheaded by Darryl, to marshal an array of marketplace resources and facilitate consumer heterogeneity. It expanded discursive space for a diversity of consumers to tell their unique stories. Next, I explain how the above social experiences and negotiations around pluralism generate consumer transformations to inspire public dialogue.

Skill Development to Channel Discourse. We discovered that consumers diligently sharpened their storytelling skills to deliver their discursive performances with greater rhetorical impact. Greg started as a slam poet and occasionally performs in story slams. He had served twenty years in prison and now utilizes slams to creatively discuss his experiences as a formerly incarcerated Black man. He enhances his storytelling skills to effectively get his message across and attended theater classes to gather adjacent skills for the same:

> Greg: And where it really made me focus…is that when I entered theater…it was like a course I was getting credit for it. And I learned a lot of things from that. Your speech mannerism, your diction. You want to have your pronunciation. You want to be able to, when you have a direction and you're in a crowd, you talking in stage, you want to have... It was so many different components of it, that we didn't know of it in the spoken word…You do slam, you do spoken word…you know how to direct your voice…I want to know how to pick out those individuals in a crowd and really connect with. Convey the whole stage, learn how to stand in front and talk to this person, this person and that person in comparison to... In comparison to standing there and just talking…

Note that Greg steers his competence enhancement efforts to pursue an effective channeling of his discursive performance ("pick out…connect with") rather than merely delivering it ("standing there and just talking"). He comprehends slams' intimate discursive space ("It becomes different because I see you now. The poems that I had, the stories that I want to tell, I can tell you to this audience now because you hear") and works on his skills to facilitate public dialogue ("I want you to hear where I come from. I want you to hear my hurt, my pain, my love"). Thus, consumers develop their storytelling skills (more data in table 3) to better channel the performative expression of their cultural identities, indicating a consumer transformation that facilitates public dialogue.

Strengthening Public Dialogue

Interdependent Co-Presence. Rules and format constituting the structure of market-mediated play necessitate participatory co-presence amongst consumers. I found that co-presence conditioned an interdependent quality of interactions amongst consumers (including rituals of judging, scoring, applauding, etc.). Market actors occasionally fashioned a sensorium of shared social experiences to envelop the consumers in an intimate co-presence. For example, when the Moth StorySLAMs had to shift to Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic, market actors played pre-recorded ambient sounds of people chatting, even as Zoom participants waited for the virtual StorySLAM to start:

> Fieldnotes: It started with that simulation of sound of audience talking to one another and the murmur. The simulation of real noise shows that there are going to be people around murmuring etc…Also, the chat thread was open with the host saying you can also answer the question of what you're looking forward to, chat with other audience members, compliment or communicate with the storytellers. People started appreciating or connecting with the tellers, there was a warm tone of feeling happy and connected, some introduced themselves – which places they're from and what they're looking forward to.

Various consumers noted this unique quality of intimate interactions in story slams (table 3). Additionally, the analysis unraveled a parallel undertaking by market actors (The Moth) to support an inclusive arena.

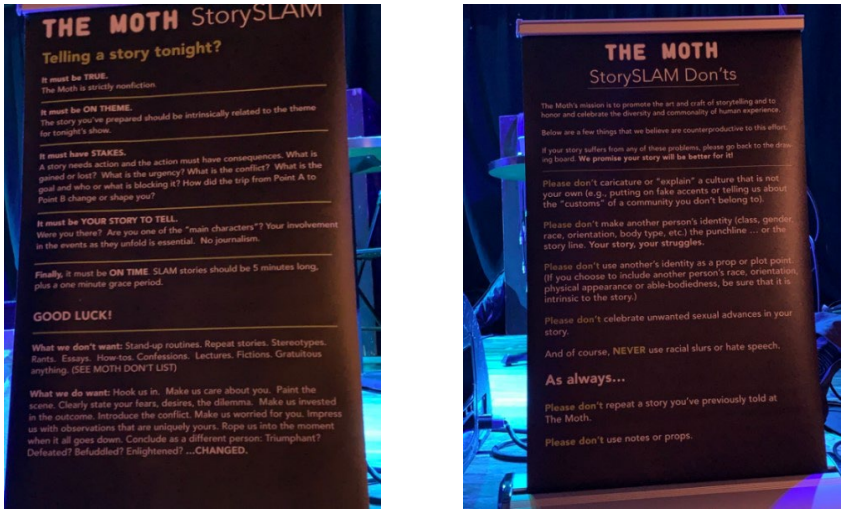
Inclusive Scripting. Market actors utilized various elements (including rules, format, material features, etc.) to script inclusion into market-mediated play. I found that such tactics enabled a safe discursive space for a diversity of consumers. For example, Mateo, an immigrant from Guatemala, describes how recent changes to rules at The Moth helped ease his concerns around safety:

> Mateo: They [The Moth] had done things like...because they were talking about people…and those stories that were a little bit transphobic, or a little bit homophobic, or a little bit of white privilege. So they had cut back on that, and they make an announcement to make sure if your story has any '-isms', you know, don't tell the stories here. So that has helped a lot. They didn't make that announcement before because they were probably thinking people know better, but some people don't know better. So now that they make that announcement, it has helped a lot.

Similarly, material elements like rule placards served as repeated visual reminders of the "Do's" and "Don'ts" in The Moth StorySLAM, emphasizing no tolerance for racial slurs or hate speech (figure 4). By instilling social experiences with such inclusive scripts (more in table 3), market actors bolster the play buffer that offers a delimited space of immunity for discursive critique (Caillois 2001a; Henricks 2015; Sicart 2014). An inclusive market-mediated play context makes consumers feel safe in discussing the societal issues that concern them. This enriches the discursive space with different perspectives, and, thereby, facilitates the transformative process of adjustments to cultural assumptions and beliefs (table 3).

FIGURE 4

THE MOTH STORYSLAM'S RULES (DO'S AND DON'TS) ARE PLACED IN FRONT OF THE STAGE



Adjustments to Cultural Beliefs. We found many participants using the metaphor of "church" to describe their transformative experiences at story slams. Emily describes how the story slams became a "church" for her, making her revisit politically conservative beliefs:

> Emily: It's almost like The Moth became my church for a while…So, I grew up going to church, and church was a huge part of our life. But it was a very toxic thing in my life. But I still miss connection and fellowship. And that's what mom always talked about. "You go to church for fellowship." She always used to say that. And so, that's almost how I see it is that I don't get a good feeling going to church. But I do get a good feeling, and I get connection, and I get a bond with individuals hearing their stories, and learning from

> them, and going off and taking that, and carrying it into the world for my son, for my husband, for other people…I changed because I've allowed those stories of those people, and those experiences, and those... Okay, here's the best way I can explain it. Prior to listening to The Moth, in my early 20s, mid 20s, I was homophobic, I was racist, I was close minded, I was judgmental, I was awful. I can't believe my husband married me. …But I definitely had my very conservative views. As I listened to stories at The Moth, and I started hearing real people, and real pain, and real vulnerability, something happened in me, something just started to change…I think about who I was, and when I started listening to The Moth. And each year slowly became...I'm such a different person. …I know certain stories, remember it's certain stories that really, "Okay, from that story, I no longer think about this topic the way I used to. This story, wow." There's refugee stories, there's torture, there's war, there's just so many good things that come from it."

Consumers often narrated how they experienced changes in their cultural beliefs after witnessing a diversity of slam performances (table 3). Thus, reflection upon and adjustment to one's cultural assumptions and beliefs is the other transformative process that can arise when market-mediated play functions as a creative mode of public dialogue.

Our analysis above uncovered that specific combinations of social experiences and marketplace negotiations centred around pluralism and inclusion can indeed foster consumer transformations, serving to inspire and fortify public dialogue. Conversely, alternative combinations yield consumer transformations that fall short of driving uninhibited, creative public dialogue. The next two pathways encapsulate these varied combinations, illustrating the formation of a discursive regime that limits consumers' discursive creativity. Operating as a

governing logic, discursive regime gives rise to predictable and aesthetically pleasing market spectacles. Consequently, it moulds the agency of consumers, steering it towards a formulaic pursuit of discourse rather than fostering creative public dialogue.

Formalizing Discursive Conduct

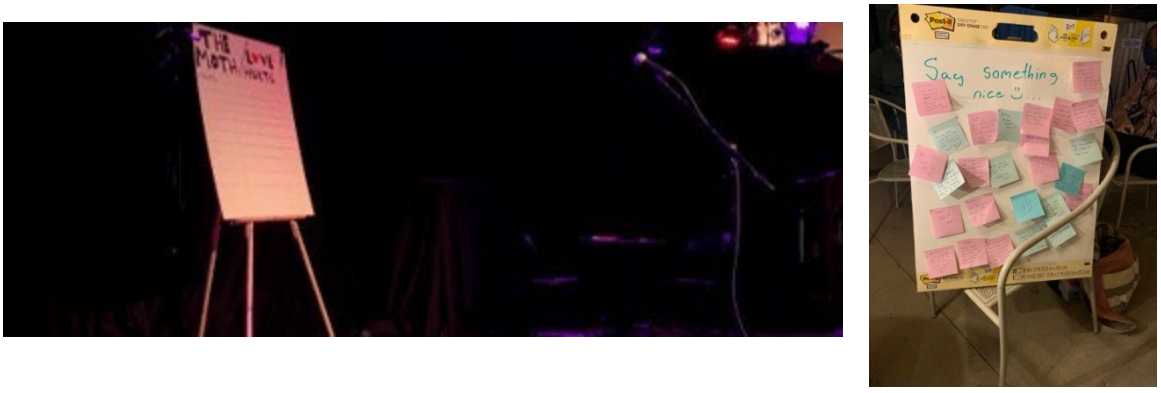
Competitive Structure Prioritizes Recognition. We found that certain market-mediated play structures made consumers prioritize progress-in-play (e.g., scores attained, winning titles) over public dialogue. Greg gripes about the judging ritual at The Moth and how it adversely affected his discursive endeavor:

> Greg: I don't want to be judged, so given a score of me telling a story about my life. It doesn't mean I don't feel my life deserves a price range or a number or anything like that. This is my story. This is my words…So, sometimes when we come out here to reveal our story and get this platform, we didn't come out here to receive a 9.2, a 6.8. Now, it becomes a fashion, like everybody going up and it's like a smack in your face. Like, I know I could have gotten like an eight, instead of a seven… if that's the case, then why would I…feel comfortable telling the story I'm gonna be judged about….So now I got to be professional. I got to be this. And I'm looking forward to being on the top two and the one winners. I forget the whole significant thing of why I was writing, because I want to release for me. I was talking to me. It was my conversation with me.

Note how the scoring ritual, an element of the play structure of The Moth StorySLAM, configures a progress-oriented field of action for consumers ("And I'm looking forward to being on the top two…"). Many informants expressed displeasure with such experiences (table 3) and blamed other structural elements like The Moth's scoreboard where the scores of all participants are recorded (figure 5). Noting this discontent, one of the local story slams' organizers decided to avoid any progress indicators for slam participants to aspire to. They incorporated a new material element, an affirmation board (figure 5) wherein participants could write comments for performers on post-it notes and stick them up, as part of their play structure. Thus, comparative ethnography shows how local story slams, compared to the market-mediated play context of The Moth StorySLAMs, could negotiate the structure of play so that recognition pursuits are not prioritized at the expense of public dialogue.

FIGURE 5

THE MOTH STORYSLAM'S SCOREBOARD ON STAGE (LEFT) V/S NEW LOCAL STORY SLAM'S AFFIRMATION BOARD (RIGHT)



Parallelly, owing to commercial and related market necessities, market actors could obstruct a plurality of perspectives from discursive participation.

Market Logic Inhibits Consumer Diversity. Market actors managing cultural institutions like The Moth often had to negotiate with market realities like commercialization. Such negotiations sometimes constricted the discursive space, i.e., decreased the possibility for a diversity of identities (across race, gender, etc.) to deliver their discursive performances. Greg grew up in low-income neighborhoods and he points out how the new requirement at The Moth, of paying only through credit card and not cash, prevents the marginalized from telling their "political story":

> Greg: Look at the environment… You come in here to the Moth is a different entity…You can't pay with cash. You have to pay with a credit card at the door…And when I was talking to you about the credit card is that in certain spaces and demograph, you have people who never in their day owned a credit card… So, it's like, you expecting them to come in here and pay with cash. If we have the bum or homeless guy…that's coming in and want to tell this political story, but doesn't have a credit card…

Note that this new revenue format not only affects "who is at the door" (Karla) but also curbs discursive opportunities. Consumers like Greg pick up on the lack of consumer diversity as a symbolic reminder of cultural differentiation, "I came out here and seeing all these faces that don't look like mine" (Greg), and consequently, they hesitate to deliver their discursive

performances, thwarting public dialogue as consumers find it difficult to performatively express their distinct cultural experiences (“And I can’t talk about that” - Greg). It should also be noted that a constricted discursive space might not affect *ludic* agency (Greg still performs in story slams) but might adversely impact *civic* agency (Greg hesitates to offer critical political discourse through his slam performances). Next, I will explain how the resulting consumer transformations curb public dialogue by formalizing discursive conduct.

Embellishing Discourse. We found that once consumers identify the discursive norms that can help them attain recognition in story slams, they start ‘work’ing towards delivering creditable discursive performances (“So now I got to be professional”, Greg). Thus, ludic (“of the nature of play”(Turner 1998)) pursuits transform into ergic (“of the nature of work”(Turner 1998)) endeavours. Dustin recounts an incident when he realized that professionalized undertakings distorted slams’ potential for public dialogue:

> Dustin: So one time I was in line at the Moth and started talking to a woman, and she's gonna tell story there…She is going to the Moth all the time…because she had written a book, I'm assuming creative nonfiction, but she was waiting to publish it because she wanted to at least be a contender in The Moth Grand Slam in New York, so she could put it on the dust jacket to assist the sales. And I just shook my head. I mean, I was just like, wow, you have this work of art that you've written and you're holding it back for who knows quite how long because you are determined to have on the jacket the, I don't know, the moniker or the metal, the trophy of Moth Grand Slam. And to me, that's an extreme that doesn't work. That's where the Moth...that was an example to Moth not working.

Various slam participants ardently perform in story slams to add to their list of professional accolades (table 3). Like Dustin, quite a few consumers found such mobilization of ergic logics as grotesque. Dustin's further elaboration shows how such ergic undertakings produce a formulaic and inauthentic approach to discursive performances:

> Dustin: It's an amazing story but I feel like I'm watching a Hollywood promo…you strip that feeling and connection of truth that politicizes you and the audience or changes you by getting too slick...And the stories can be amazing but they are honestly so worked out. They've clearly been coached. They're working…

This explains how mobilization of ergic logics ("they're working", "coached") makes consumers embellish their discursive performances, i.e., present them as ideal and refined, thereby thwarting the possibility of expressing one's distinct cultural identity ("you strip that feeling and connection of truth that politicizes you…"). Thus, market-mediated play starts shaping into a discursive regime (figure 1) that governs consumers' performative conduct ("getting too slick").

Spectaclizing Discursive Performances

Favoring Entertainment Logic. The structure of market-mediated play can dramatize consumer interactions to produce market spectacles. Various consumers (table 3)

frequently contrasted The Moth StorySLAM's setup with that of local story slams. Most prominently, they felt that the former's slam venue resembled a stage-facing theatre (figure 6) compared to local story slams' familial "warm, fuzzy feeling" (Molly) space.

FIGURE 6

SEATING SETUP OF THE MOTH STORYSLAM (LEFT) VS. LOCAL STORY SLAM (RIGHT)

Greg elaborates on how The Moth's theatrical vibe makes it difficult for him to deliver his discursive performances. He draws a distinction between entertainment-focused theatre and participation-focused slam culture. While recounting his experience, he gesticulates to establish a hierarchy of social experiences across the contexts of theatre, The Moth StorySLAMs, poetry slams/spoken word, and participatory art culture. His explanation posits that The Moth's StorySLAM is closer to the logics of theatre, while the "slam" culture is closer to the logics of participatory arts. When he talks about The Moth, he talks about it from the perspective of a spectator who is "going to go here and listen to a story". Whereas, when he talks about the spoken word/slam poetry culture, he pivots towards the perspective of an empowered performer:

> Greg: So, I did theater. So, you have theater. You have the Moth that's up here [[gesticulates here]]. Then the slam comes in in that, in the arts. Like, I don't feel slam get as much…as much clout as theater or storytelling will get. Because even when you do slam, like, slam is getting on the stage. But when you think about the Moth…the Moth on a different stage than they typically give everybody else. Look at the crowd that comes to it. It's considered…and classy and, "Oh, I'm going to go here and listen to a story,"…Spoken word, hey, we're coming up here. Hey, I can come up here in some jogging pants on, a fitted hat and go up here and tell you what I want to tell you.

This distinction between what is experienced as entertainment versus participatory art culture is crucial as it indicates whether social interactions, instantiated by market-mediated play, are conditioning consumer transformations towards public dialogue or not. Dewey's (1954) oft-cited articulation, "vision is a spectator, hearing is a participator", emphasizes public *participation* compared to unreflective *spectation,* as a condition of public dialogue. Keeping that in perspective, findings show that dramatized social interactions indicate that an entertainment logic operates to synthesize market spectacles. Parallelly, I also found that market logics were adversely influencing the play buffer that supports a safe space for the marginalized to deliver critical public dialogue.

Compromised Inclusivity. Various informants emphasized that their discursive performances were not just "therapeutic confessions" (Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010) but political risk-taking. Thus, unsafe conditions hampered their discursive participation by filtering the content and styles of stories they could perform. Anne talks about her tussle with Ron, one of

the local story slam founders. She realized that Ron was not sympathetic to women's concerns about livestreaming their slam performances and made her feel that this wasn't a safe space for her discursive performances around gender:

> Anne: So it felt like diversity is not on Ron's mind at all. And then, the fight came when Ron wanted to start doing live streaming of the event and, specifically, he wanted to do live streaming for...starting with a theme that I felt could encourage people to tell some pretty, like, personal stories. I think the theme was breakups. And he wanted to live stream this event with video onto Facebook. And I came to him with concerns that, like, women who are telling breakup stories may not want their video to be broadcast on Facebook. A lot of times we have real fear about our exes coming to find us and doing harm to us. And especially if someone is a sexual assault or rape survivor. Like, because [local story slam] is such a supportive community, it could be a really great place to open up and tell that kind of story. But when you use live streaming to open it up to anyone on the internet, it no longer feels like a safe space. You take that safe community aspect away. And so, I tried to explain this to Ron. And it was clear he had already made up his mind to do live streaming. And so, because of that, I just decided, like, "Okay, there are only certain kinds of stories I can tell." I did not like the live streaming. Ron knew that. And so sometimes I wouldn't tell stories when usually I would have.

Although such publicizing is favorable for associated benefits to brand awareness and commerce, the resultant blending of the immunity-granting autotelic buffer of slams and broader societal spheres come across as unfavorable for such vulnerable consumers (table 3). Note that

an unsafe discursive space is also an impoverished one ("there are only certain kinds of stories I can tell"), thwarting the opportunity for consumers to experience diverse perspectives and, thereby, adjustments to their cultural beliefs and assumptions, as we see below.

Sanitizing Discourse. The Moth's branding repertoire proclaims its commitment to DEI values. However, quite a few informants termed this as mere virtue signaling. Other informants (table 3) similarly noticed that discursive performances were not necessarily being utilized to spark critical public dialogue but, instead, were being commodified towards market spectacles. Darryl won one of The Moth StorySLAMs and was preparing for the GrandSlam. His description reveals that The Moth prefers to stay in a political Goldilocks Zone by not "stretching too far" with radically political stories and deploys dissuasive tactics to sustain that. Darryl is one of the very few male Black story slam performers. He felt discouraged and unliked by a cultural institution like The Moth. Its purported aim of elevating diverse voices rang hollow for him:

> Fieldnotes: When I asked him (Darryl) whether the Moth storytellers are training him for the Grand Slam, he said that the Moth people don't like him particularly. Darryl thinks the Moth don't like him enough to train him for grand slam. When asked why, he says that they think he is "polarizing" and that they in the moth can't stretch that far even if you listen to the radio hour, the stories aren't that political. Also, he says that unlike poetry slam, because poetry slam inc got bankrupt, the moth is trying to not replicate that and survive and thus is commercial.

Thus, we see how such sanitization of discourses can result in a discursive regime that governs consumers' performative conduct ("…can't stretch that far…"). Also, sanitization of discourse by market institutions, to deliver palatable politics to their consumer base, will impoverish the discursive space as consumers will not be able to hear Darryl and other marginalized's politically raw and harsh, but authentic realities. Unable to experience divergent cultural perspectives, consumers will not be able to undergo the transformative process of adjustments to their cultural assumptions and beliefs (table 3).

Therefore, my research indicates that the influence of market-mediated play is dual-faceted. It is capable of either fostering a system of creative public dialogue or giving rise to a discursive regime that impedes creative public dialogue by governing the logic of how discursive performances are to be conducted. While market-mediated play has the potential to invigorate public dialogue through transformative processes (skill development to channel discourse, revision of assumptions and beliefs), it can also metamorphose into a discursive regime, subjecting consumers to a formulaic approach in constructing market spectacles.

DISCUSSION

Critical public sphere scholarship has been emphasizing creative modes of public dialogue that pluralize modes of representation and enable further inclusion in the civic realm. However, play as one such mode of discursive engagement, with unique transformative capabilities, has not been sufficiently investigated. Consumer research has substantially analyzed

market-mediated play forms in consumer culture, under the ambit of ludic consumption studies. These studies have emphasized the pleasurable and hedonistic aspects of play and how they can be enabled and disrupted. But the potential of market-mediated play to function as a civic engagement platform, for consumers to exercise their political agency, has not been tapped. This potential needs to be explored because contemporary consumer culture is replete with scenarios wherein consumers and marketers are indeed utilizing and shaping play platforms for public dialogue, respectively. Various previously discussed examples confirm that. Certain examples also illuminate problematic consequences of such endeavors. The above theoretical lacunae across the three literature streams (public sphere, play, and consumer studies) prompt the question - How can market-mediated play facilitate or thwart civic engagement? My study arms these three literature streams to critically approach instances of playful civic engagement in contemporary consumer culture. The results of my study sit squarely in the conceptual space bordered by public sphere, play, and market-mediated play studies. My thesis has practical implications too. It can help market actors to judiciously design their market-mediated play platforms towards civic engagement. Through critical analysis of one such case, story slams, my study contributes to each of the three literature streams.

First, it informs the critical public sphere scholarship that the contemporary commercial consumer culture is actively espousing market-mediated play, like the slam culture, to build contemporary salons[55] and the assumption that the public sphere is "not an arena of market relations but rather one of discursive relations" (Fraser 1990, 57) needs to be revisited. This insight can be an important addition to the critical public sphere scholarship's toolbox. The

[55] https://www.nytimes.com/1999/05/02/arts/theater-to-fill-a-club-theres-nothing-like-a-story.html

emerging studies in the latter have been reimagining discourse in the contemporary public sphere by critiquing the exclusionary norms of discursive practices pertaining to the dominant rational-deliberation model of the public sphere (Habermas 1991). This thesis adds to those critical studies by proposing play as a creative discursive mode. Second, play studies have generally analyzed play *attitudes* (Caillois 1958/2001) and associated phenomenological experiences (Sutton-Smith 2009). Contemporary play scholars, like Sicart (2014, 114) have emphasized that given play "takes place in an ecology of things," a theory of play that identifies the mechanics of the things that constitute it, beyond attitudinal or phenomenological experiences of players, will help approach play in "meaningful and critical ways." This study's post-phenomenological analysis of one such instance of play offers a vocabulary for such a theory of play. Third, my study contributes to consumer research by extending the civic understanding of market-mediated play in the field. A more detailed explanation of these theoretical contributions, along with practical implications and future areas, is offered below.

The first contribution of my study arose when it tackled the following research question – How does the *structure* of market-mediated play facilitate (or thwart) conditions for public dialogue? The findings show that market-mediated play activates quality of interactions that can facilitate or thwart not only *ludic* experiences of fun, enjoyment, hedonic pleasure and "communitas" (Arnould and Price 199; Belk and Costa 1998; Canniford and Shankar 2013; Celsi et al. 1993; Holbrook et al. 1984; Kristiansen et al. 2022; Seregina and Weijo 2017; Tumbat and Belk 2011; Woermann and Rokka 2015), but also shared *civic* experiences. The difference between the two emerged through the findings, which illuminated that a favorable ludic experience need not always translate into civic engagement. Thus, this thesis helps in critically charting the journey from *ludic* to *civic*.

Future research can further build upon the conceptualized logics and test them in newer territories, like the immersive reality play worlds in the metaverse. The "financial public sphere" (Cossu 2022) of decentralized blockchain platforms that underlie the metaverse, have emphasized emancipatory aims of "escape from precariousness, inequality, and indebtedness." However, encoding of creativity through NFTs and resulting ownership rights and exclusivity could activate ergic logics of territorialization. Such commodification of metaverse's evolving market-mediated play resource mix could activate logics that have yet been unexplored, especially in gaming worlds like *The Sandbox* where players build, own, and monetize their ludic assets[56]. Particularly, with social action and protest platforms, like *Wistaverse*[57], launching in play worlds like *The Sandbox*, logics that result through the structure of play in such immersive market-mediated play platforms will need critical scholarly scrutiny.

In terms of practical implications, market actors should critically approach the gamification mantra, in case they want their platforms to facilitate civic engagement. Gamifying practices can position consumers by the logic of the *ergic,* i.e., quantifying their pursuits and facilitating territorialization and ownership. These effects can become more pronounced than the logics of the *ludic,* that favors quality of interactions supporting solidarity and communion. Gamification, as a design and marketing strategy, might be more applicable in consumption practices that have values of goal-completion and functionality (e.g., fitness trackers and loyalty programs). Indiscriminate adoption of gamification in areas that have values of communal solidarity can backfire, as *The Activism* example illustrates. This study can better inform market actors even as they critically approach their design and strategy decisions around ludic

[56] https://register.sandbox.game/
[57] https://www.wistaverse.com/

experiences. Further, immersive market-mediated play worlds in the metaverse will require market actors to design branded ludic worlds (e.g., *Wendyverse*[58]*, Nikeland*[59]*, Vans*[60]*,* etc.) that might be utilized by consumers for civic engagement. Thus, the structure of ludic worlds should not be solely guided by a user-centric design approach that overemphasizes psychological perspectives pertaining to how a user/consumer will interact with the brand's symbols, products, and services in the immersive ludic world. It should also be guided by a civic design approach that sees the immersive ludic world as a social universe for citizen-consumers. What kind of logics would the brands want to impart in such a world? How does the brand want to position its consumers through its ludic experiences? The analysis in this thesis can help in that regard.

The second contribution of my study arose when it tackled the following research question – How can market-mediated play enable (or hinder) pluralism and inclusion? The findings reveal that market-mediated play can facilitate or thwart not only *ludic* agency (Kozinets et al. 2004) but also *civic* agency. The difference between the two emerged through the findings, which illuminated that consumers could enact their ludic agency but, in cases when the discursive space had barriers for certain identities or was unsafe for them, their civic agency was compromised. Democratic commitment to pluralism and inclusion is important for a market-mediated play platform to serve as a public. Market-mediated play literature should also engage with topics of pluralism and inclusion, as various ludic activities are now being utilized by consumers for civic engagement. Story slam context's analysis revealed that we cannot stop at assuming play as a hedonistic, autotelic activity. Play, via ludic consumption, when deployed as a civic engagement tool, is embedded in the existential realities of the society, of vulnerable and

[58] https://www.wendys.com/blog/blog-home/wendyverse-here-heres-how-you-get-it#:~:text=In%20Sunrise%20City%2C%20you%20can,glider%20all%20around%20the%20world
[59] https://www.roblox.com/games/7462526249/NIKELAND-NEW
[60] https://www.roblox.com/games/6679274937/Vans-World

marginalized identities facing accessibility barriers and safety issues. Prior literature on market-mediated play has not analyzed its public potential. Studies have analyzed how practice misalignments (Woermann and Rokka 2015) and material constraints (Seregina and Weijo 2017) can disrupt ludic experiences. As my findings reveal, even if there are no misalignments and material constraints, a democratically vacuous market-mediated play context will not be able to pluralistically engage a diversity of consumers.

Future studies can utilize the thesis to investigate market-mediated play contexts that could foster ludic "counterpublics" (Asen 2000). Ludic counterpublics will be spaces of discursive engagement created by marginalized consumers to circulate discourses creatively amongst them in safer settings, especially in cases when the dominant public sphere has not expanded its discursive space for such groups. Ethnoracial minorities facing exclusion from consumption contexts have been actively forming and sustaining digital enclaves to enhance their market participation (Brouard et al. 2023). Studies can investigate instances wherein minority groups and marginalized consumers construct *ludic* enclaves. Divergent contexts of market-mediated play that foster ludic "anti-publics" (Davis 2020) or ludic "parasitic publics" (Larson and McHendry Jr 2019) can also serve as useful boundary conditions to investigate further. Anti-publics and parasitic publics narrow the discursive space by excluding certain identities through oppression and privilege and render it unsafe by propagating alt-right conservative values. Various market-mediated play contexts have been propagating exclusion and marginalization (Drenten et al. 2022). Understanding how these factors condition antagonistic *publics* requires scholarly scrutiny.

In terms of practical implications, market actors designing ludic experiences for civic engagement should envision inculcation of pluralism and inclusion as a continuous, conscious

process, rather than relegating it to just the initial conceptualization phase. The Moth did not stop after offering its StorySLAM as a ludic *platform* for the marginalized and the underrepresented to engage in public dialogue. It has been offering ludic *resources*, in the form of storytelling workshops, to the same section of consumers. However, commercial imperatives and brand awareness could impede consumer heterogeneity and inhibit safe spaces, respectively, thereby adversely affecting the immunity buffer that play offers. Further, the immersive play worlds constituting the metaverse need to be designed with pluralism and inclusion in mind. Accessibility barriers to technology (VR headsets, platform access) and lack of digital literacy will constrict the discursive space for certain citizens to engage in the emerging market-mediated play worlds of the metaverse. The egalitarian, pluralistic ideals touted by the metaverse creators are already falling flat as graphical virtual personas (avatars) are being priced differently based on race and gender[61,62]. Thus, market logics are already creating barriers for a plurality of identities to participate in these ludic worlds. Further, the techno-utopian image of the metaverse as an "embodied internet where you're in the experience, not just looking at it"[63] could pose serious safety issues for consumers. Mark Zuckerberg in his 2021 Meta Founder's Letter stated that "feeling truly present with another person is the ultimate dream of social technology" and thus the "defining quality of the metaverse will be a feeling of presence – like you are right there with another person." The focus is clearly on enhancing the immersive social ecology of a new internet to direct pleasurable consumer experiences. However, with a chunk of the active users of the metaverse coming from play platforms like Roblox, Minecraft, and Fortnite[64], issues about

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[61] https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-12-06/cryptopunk-nft-prices-suggest-a-diversity-problem-in-the-metaverse#xj4y7vzkg

[62] https://www.fastcompany.com/90706466/the-metaverse-is-shaping-up-to-be-a-racist-hellscape-it-doesnt-have-to-be-that-way

[63] https://about.fb.com/news/2021/10/founders-letter/

[64] https://influencermarketinghub.com/metaverse-stats/

safety of consumers engaging in market-mediated play need to be addressed. A player was sexually harassed while playing the *Echo VR* game and could not report the incident because she could not rewatch the incident and locate the username of the harasser.[65] Thus, ludic VR consumptionscape is brimming with content moderation and safety issues, and a much more embodied internet, i.e., the metaverse, will only worsen these problems if the market-mediated play platforms do not factor in pluralism and inclusion as core principles. Market actors can prevent replication of social media's debacles of crisis management by paying careful attention to these principles in the new iteration of immersive media. The focus should go beyond liability through corrective measures to responsibility through informed ludic experience design.

The third contribution of my study arose when it tackled the following research question – How can market-mediated play facilitate (or thwart) reflexive transformation of consumers into civic subjects? Findings capture self-transformations of the kind that have not been sufficiently analyzed in market-mediated play studies. Studies in this domain have mostly discussed transformations from a dramaturgical perspective, i.e., authenticating of the self (Arnould and Price 1993) or internalization of performative roles (Belk and Costa 1998; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Study of the story slam context illustrates that transformation through market-mediated play need not be limited to performative acts of incorporating a new self-identity or discovering the authentic self. Market-mediated play can transform consumers into citizen-consumers. Market-mediated play literature can analyze such *generative transformations* by utilizing the analysis in this thesis. The field can approach instances of market-mediated play with a new lens that goes beyond the typical ludic consequences of fun, enjoyment, and pleasure,

[65] https://www.cnet.com/tech/gaming/features/as-facebook-plans-the-metaverse-it-struggles-to-combat-harassment-in-vr/

to political and moral action that can empower consumers and shift their political perspectives. Service-oriented perspectives of directing consumers' experiences of pleasure and involvement (Siebert et al. 2020) can be complemented with perspectives of consumer empowerment through experience design.

Future research can execute longitudinal studies to chart the effects of social change that such transformations can entail. They can also identify other barriers to the production of civic selves. There is potential in investigating how play might be deployed as a cultural negotiation tactic rooted in "white man's guilt/burden" (Benjamin and Arendt 1978) rather than in genuine transformative pursuits. Further, social impact games in immersive reality experiences[66] could inculcate new forms of "digitally native activism" (Li, Bernard and Luczak-Roesch 2021), wherein consumers could be engaging politically, but in the absence of physical or virtual co-presence. Given the emergence of such market-mediated play platforms, researchers can utilize this study to gauge the effectiveness of such political ludic engagements and assess whether they create meaningful social change or support tokenistic displays of "slacktivism" (Kristofferson, White and Peloza 2014).

In terms of practical implications, the study illustrates that brands and market institutions might have a greater public responsibility in the contemporary political climate. When it comes to ludic experiences that inculcate unique possibilities of sensory engagement, embodiment, and creativity, the potential of deploying market-mediated play platforms as political tools is only greater, as evidenced by various contemporary examples. Brands cannot be politically disinterested anymore, and in the post-postmodern branding paradigm, they will have to consider offering cultural resources to consumers for the latter's identity projects (Holt 2002). However,

[66] https://www.gamesforchange.org/

as the findings indicate, such political projects (both by market actors and consumers), can get tricky. Various factors in the marketplace adversely affected the production of civic subjects out of consumers, as they ended up crafting spectacles out of consumers' ludic pursuits or aestheticizing their performances. Market institutions' approach of clustering consumers into market segments can be problematic in contexts when market-mediated play is being utilized for public dialogue. Institutions could end up sanitizing their political endeavors, i.e., aiming at not how consumers can politically transform in these spaces but at celebrating pluralism and inclusion owing to the lucrative market segments such endeavors can tap (Cova et al. 2013; Holt 2002). These consequences can evade transformative civic engagement and, instead, support a market industry of "shopping for change" (Littler 2008). My study suggests that offering cultural resources that empower consumers in the post-postmodern branding paradigm (Holt 2002) is not enough. The Moth's platform, as a cultural resource, was susceptible to spectaclization and aestheticization, leading to a superficial pursuit of political engagement. Thus, brands need to critically approach their market-mediated play platforms and analyze how market imperatives might be turning these empowering cultural resources into entertainment-oriented spectacles.

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