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Frustrated Fatshionistas: An Institutional Theory Perspective on Consumer Quests for Greater Choice in Mainstream Markets

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Why and how do marginalized consumers mobilize to seek greater inclusion in and more choice from mainstream markets? We develop answers to these questions drawing on institutional theory and a qualitative investigation of Fatshionistas, plus-sized consumers who want more options from mainstream fashion marketers. Three triggers for mobilization are posited: development of a collective identity, identification of inspiring institutional entrepreneurs, and access to mobilizing institutional logics from adjacent fields. Several change strategies that reinforce institutional logics while unsettling specific institutionalized practices are identified. Our discussion highlights diverse market change dynamics that are likely when consumers are more versus less legitimate in the eyes of mainstream marketers and in instances where the changes consumers seek are more versus less consistent with prevailing institutions and logics.

In market-driven economies, we might tend to assume that consumers will seldom experience a scarce supply of goods they are willing to pay for. Yet it is not rare for consumers—particularly those who have historically been socially stigmatized—to perceive that the market is failing to meet their needs. For example, African American consumers living in or near the impoverished neighborhood studied by Crockett and Wallendorf (2004) routinely experienced attenuated access to a variety of goods and services they both wanted and could afford. Similarly, until recently, Turkish women seeking “tasteful *tesettür*” (veils) perceived few offerings available to them in the marketplace (Sandicki and Ger 2010). In this study, we analyze another

stigmatized group that perceives that the market does not provide options that are adequate to their needs: consumers of plus-size fashion. The following quote from a blogger who routinely writes on this topic illustrates the frustrations these consumers experience:

When I [damage] my clothes in some way, I tend to panic about it a little bit. . . . This, my friends, is a side effect of living with style scarcity. Because I really don't have any reason to believe I'd find something like the dress [that is torn] ever again. Now, no longer being in possession of a particular dress is not exactly a hardship; certainly not on the level of not having a place to live or enough to eat. But the panic bubbles up anyway, because I can't just run to Anthropologie or H&M or where-ever the ladies several sizes down from me do their shopping and pick up another. Fat style is a scarce resource. (Lesley Kinzel, *Two Whole Cakes*, January 21, 2009)

In thousands of online posts like this, bloggers who are self-styled Fatshionistas (fashion lovers who wear plus-size clothing) indicate their view that the mainstream market provides them with too few fashionable clothing options. In principle such behavior is consistent with a pursuit of the right to consumer choice that is enshrined by law in many market-based economies. In practice, consumers frequently remain relatively disengaged from seeking greater inclusion in markets where they feel underserved. Even when they

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believe their marketplace choices are unduly restricted, consumers often fail to take action (Henry 2010).

Prior consumer research has identified strategies deployed by consumers when they are dissatisfied with a particular service provider or brand (Ward and Ostrom 2006), but less attention has been focused on cases where consumers experience marginalization in that they feel their choices in mainstream markets are simply too limited. A welcome exception is Sandicki and Ger's (2010) work, which has helpfully analyzed a case wherein consumers whose needs are unmet participate in the creation of a parallel taste structure. However, we lack a theoretical understanding of a case where consumers want greater access to the products valorized in an existing taste structure reflected in the mainstream marketplace, and we know little about the triggers that lead consumers to initiate efforts to ameliorate their marginalization in markets they believe offer them too little choice. Our goals in this article, therefore, are to develop a better understanding of (1) the triggers that prompt consumers to seek greater inclusion in and a more satisfactory set of offerings from mainstream marketers and (2) the strategies consumers will use when they seek greater inclusion and choice.

In pursuing these goals, we develop insights from a qualitative study of Fatshionista bloggers and their followers who desire a greater range of fashionable plus-size clothing choices. We interpret our qualitative data drawing on key concepts from institutional theory. Some of the core notions of this theory have proven useful in understanding initiatives taken by marketers (Arnold, Kozinets, and Handelman 2001; Handelman and Arnold 1999; Humphreys 2010a, 2010b), but the theory has not yet been used to understand when and how consumers will try to intervene in established markets. We believe that drawing on institutional theory for this purpose is valuable given that the theoretical perspectives thus far advanced to explain consumers' efforts to intervene in markets seem insufficient to account for consumer quests for greater market inclusion.

For example, one theoretical perspective developed to understand how consumers can contribute to market change is a modified version of co-optation theory. Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) posit that, in markets where global capitalists have co-opted countercultural consumer symbols and practices, countervailing markets may emerge through the collaborative efforts of consumer evangelists and entrepreneurial actors whose interests lie in preserving and commercially cultivating reclaimed countercultural meanings. This theory is clearly useful for understanding market dynamics in contexts where (1) mainstream marketers (which we define as large, high-profile corporations with strong name brands) have co-opted countercultural meanings and (2) consumers want to be served by alternative marketers and resist reinforcing the practices of mainstream marketers or contributing to their profits. However, Thompson and Coskuner-Balli's framework is less applicable in contexts where consumers would be delighted to make purchases from mainstream marketers if only options were available.

A second theoretical perspective, similarly limited in ap-

plicability, is Giesler's (2008) explanation of marketplace dynamics in the music industry. Giesler introduced the notion of marketplace drama to help account for events that unfolded when consumers attempted to engage in free downloading as a means of access to artistic work. Giesler (2008) notes that the drama-based account of market evolution is specifically relevant in markets in the cultural creative sphere where there is a fundamental tension between the sharing and owning of creative goods. Understandably, this perspective is not readily applicable in a context where consumers simply seek more goods they can pay for versus trying to circumvent the marketing practice of charging for goods sold.

A third approach to understanding how consumers may change markets entails examining the formation of "parallel taste structures" (Sandicki and Ger 2010). Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, Sandicki and Ger (2010, 32) explain that "consumption practices and fashion in particular can have an important role in the construction of a new, parallel taste structure. Fashion can be both a key medium and a marker of a new habitus." In their study, consumers were not so much struggling with marketers in order to obtain more choice as with a dominant habitus that positioned their preferences and beliefs as marginal. As Sandicki and Ger demonstrate, through the personalization and aestheticization of the *tesettür*, which reproduces their parallel taste structure, veiled consumers and their practices eventually made the *tesettür* viable as a business opportunity for fashion marketers. While relevant for understanding choices that face a group of consumers whose preferences are stigmatized, this perspective is insufficient in a context where consumers want to be able to participate in the mainstream market without developing (or being relegated to) a parallel taste structure.

Finally, a fourth theoretical perspective that helps explain how consumers can contribute to market change is new social movements (NSM) theory. NSM theorists focus on how groups coalesce to make claims for or against certain practices in order to create or transform institutional arrangements (McCarthy and Zald 1977). They investigate how change proponents discursively frame their own identities, the desired change, and the opponents who are vilified. Kozinets and Handelman (2004), for example, drew on NSM theory in their study of how anticonsumption activists attempt to challenge some of the practices of global capitalism. One key premise of NSM theory is that acts of framing are critical to mobilizing movements, since these acts create a coherent identity for those who are enjoined to act, a coherent focus for change, and a coherent enemy.

Of the perspectives reviewed here, the latter two seem potentially most relevant to our context. Indeed, concepts from the work of Bourdieu and from NSM theory have frequently been combined with institutional theory to study how actors create new institutions or transform existing ones (Hardy and Maguire 2010). However, the notion of parallel taste structures per se appears most relevant to understanding consumers who wish to differentiate themselves from other

consumers in an established market (Sandicki and Ger 2010), and NSM theory is most applicable for understanding the mobilization of adversarial movements that challenge fundamental aspects of institutions (Tarrow 1998). The sufficiency of either is less clear for understanding a case such as ours, where consumers want institutional practices to be modified in a manner that would make the mainstream offerings in a field more accessible to them. For this reason, while remaining sensitized to the insights of NSM theory and the notion of parallel taste structures, we draw on institutional theory, which addresses both the preservation and the modification of institutions within organizational fields.

Given the questions we address and our deployment of institutional theory, our study's contributions are threefold. First, we complement prior work that identified some enablers of, and barriers to, consumers striving for changes they believe would increase the extent to which markets meet their needs (Henry 2010). Whereas Henry identified general ideologies that could serve to facilitate consumers' engagement in seeking to improve markets, we identify organizational field-level dynamics that fuel the mobilization of consumers. Specifically, we find that the emergence of a collective consumer identity among a market segment and the identification by that collective of institutional entrepreneurs from whom they draw inspiration are two field-level factors that increase the chances consumers will pursue what they believe the market should provide them. In addition, we find that consumers' ability to appropriate some logic that legitimates their desire for greater market inclusion from a field adjacent to the market further fuels their mobilization.

Second, by looking at consumers whose goals are to gain greater inclusion in a market and more offerings from mainstream marketers, we complement prior work that has focused on the strategies of consumers who are challenging the very logic of markets and seeking profound changes in marketing practices (Giesler 2008; Kozinets and Handelman 2004). We identify three strategies relevant in the type of context we investigate: appealing to institutional logics, publicizing desirable institutional innovations and persistent institutional impediments, and allying with more powerful institutional actors. In doing so, we offer a conceptualization that integrates seemingly disparate studies in our field: those that look at resistance to mainstream markets and those that look at consumers who contribute to advancing the interest of mainstream marketers by participating in brand communities (Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009). These two types of studies differ in relation to both the degree of legitimacy consumers have within the mainstream market and the type of change agenda that consumers harbor. We draw attention to the importance of attending to both aspects if we are to make sense of the strategies used by consumers to seek change.

Third, this study extends our understanding of how institutional theory can help to illuminate marketplace phenomena of interest to consumer researchers. Prior work that has drawn from institutional theory has focused primarily on understanding how marketers legitimate their offerings

(Grayson, Johnson, and Chen 2008; Handelman and Arnold 1999; Humphreys 2010a, 2010b) and how consumers come to perceive brands as legitimate (Kates 2004). In our study, we draw on the concept of legitimacy to show that it can be applied to consumers and to demonstrate how consumer (il)legitimacy affects market dynamics. Further, we integrate Bourdieuan insights with institutional theory to consider how some consumers within organizational fields may develop differentiated symbolic capital that can increase their potential to influence market changes. We also introduce to the consumer research literature the concepts of institutional logics and institutional entrepreneurship, which enable us to more fully understand consumers as actors who draw on these logics in efforts to change markets.

Our article is organized as follows. We first present key elements of institutional theory that are relevant for understanding the dynamics of market change efforts. We then describe our context and our methods. Our findings and our analysis are presented next. We conclude with implications for theory and future research.

INSTITUTIONAL THEORY AS A LENS ON MARKETS

One way of understanding markets is to regard them as organizational fields comprising a set of institutions. The term "institutions" refers to persistent practices, understandings, and rules shared by actors in an organizational field (Lawrence and Phillips 2004, 692). Organizational fields produce related outputs and use related resources (DiMaggio 1988), such as those in the health care (Galvin 2002), accounting (Greenwood and Suddaby 2005), financial services (Lounsbury 2002), and fashion sectors (Bourdieu 1993a, 1993b). Scholars have used institutional theory to examine organizational fields and understand how individual actors, firms, or entire markets gain or maintain legitimacy (Grayson et al. 2008; Handelman and Arnold 1999; Humphreys 2010a, 2010b).

Legitimacy is a central notion in institutional theory. Legitimacy takes various forms, in particular, regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive legitimacy (Scott 1991; Suchman 1995). Within consumer research, these conceptions of legitimacy are usually applied to particular marketers, brands, or practices (one exception is Muñiz and O'Guinn [2001], who refer to marketplace legitimacy as a characteristic of brand community members). Humphreys (2010a, 2010b) looked at the process by which all three types of legitimacy were achieved for the casino gambling industry and the consumer practice of gambling at casinos. She found that regulatory legitimacy, which refers to being sanctioned by explicit rules or policies, was achieved through the legalization of gambling. Normative legitimacy (which refers to congruence between the social values associated with or implied by actors and the norms of acceptable behavior in the larger social system [Dowling and Pfeffer 1975]) and cultural-cognitive legitimacy (which is the degree of fit with existing cognitive and cultural schemas) were achieved over time as marketers within the industry and journalists writ-

ing about it restructured public discourse related to the consumer practice of gambling and the casino gambling industry. Kates (2004) also studied a case wherein marketers worked to increase the legitimacy of their offerings: he studied how gay consumers reacted to the efforts of marketers like Levi's that strove to gain legitimacy for their brand within the gay community.

The concept of legitimacy has been helpful for understanding how marketers attempt to change markets and gain consumer acceptance. Like others, we will draw on that concept as we develop our analysis. In particular, we will draw from studies that acknowledge the differences in legitimacy among individual actors in a field (Maguire, Hardy, and Lawrence 2004). We conceptualize the notion of consumers' quest for greater inclusion within markets as commensurate with these consumers seeking greater legitimacy within the field.

Beyond the concept of legitimacy, however, we use two additional elements of institutional theory to understand why and how consumers might seek greater inclusion in a market. First, we highlight the concept of institutional logics (Alford and Friedland 1985; Thornton 2002, 2004). Institutional logics define the content and meaning of institutions. They are socially constructed assumptions, values, and beliefs by which people in particular contexts provide meaning to their social reality (Thornton 2004; Thornton and Ocasio 1999). Within the field of fashion, for example, two institutional logics have long guided actions and understandings: the logic of art and the logic of commerce (Bourdieu and Delsaut 1975; Entwistle and Rocamora 2006).

Theorists argue that the prevailing institutional logics in a field both enable and constrain the agency of actors in that field. In order to understand how actors in fields operate, whether they seek to maintain or alter the status quo, their "embedded agency" (Greenwood and Suddaby 2006; Seo and Creed 2002) must be recognized. Although actors can, and frequently do, attempt to act as institutional change agents who leverage resources to create or transform practices (Maguire et al. 2004), they cannot operate completely outside the institutional logics in their fields as they cognitively take those logics for granted (Leca and Naccache 2006). This insight is crucial to understanding how actors reproduce institutions over time as well as how they may attempt to transform those institutions when they feel the need for change.

Second, we highlight the concept of institutional entrepreneurship. The institutional entrepreneurship literature has concerned itself with fields where some actors are dissatisfied with some aspect(s) of the status quo, such as the legitimacy of certain institutions or the illegitimacy of particular practices. Institutional entrepreneurs are people or groups who attempt to act on their dissatisfaction in order to change the field. In some cases they may be profit-seeking firms, literal entrepreneurs who are seeking to gain an advantage over competitors (Lawrence and Philips 2004). In other cases, those we refer to as institutional entrepreneurs may not be entrepreneurs in the conventional sense at all:

often, they are activists without a profit motive who desire social justice or equality (Creed, Scully, and Austin 2002; Maguire et al 2004). It is also possible that both profit and social justice motives, as well as others, may animate an institutional actor to attempt to bring about changes.

It is important to note that institutional entrepreneurs are often unsuccessful: change attempts frequently fail. Thus, institutional entrepreneurs must be regarded as potential change agents, not necessarily as successful change agents. Studies of failed institutional entrepreneurship have identified several causes: the lack of political opportunities and mobilization, the lack or weakness of ties with multiple audiences, the co-optation of change efforts by dominant players in an institutional field, and an excessive incompatibility between a dominant logic and a subversive framing (Olsen and Boxenbaum 2009; Rao and Giorgi 2006). In addition, the changes promoted by institutional entrepreneurs frequently emerge as a synthesis from conflict and contestation among several actors who hold different positions and interests. The overall process of change rarely turns out to be what the institutional entrepreneurs had envisioned or aimed for (Hargrave and Van de Ven 2006; Hiatt, Sine, and Tolbert 2009).

To conclude this review we reinforce the point that institutional logics both constrain and enable institutional entrepreneurs as they seek to legitimate new practices or de-legitimate extant ones. Thus, in examining how consumers might seek to bring about market changes that will enable them to be more included in, and better served by, those markets, our attention is directed toward the ways in which consumers draw on the institutional logics that they, and other actors in the field, take for granted. We now offer a brief historical overview of the field of fashion and of the consumers who seek to change it.

CONTEXT: THE FIELD OF FASHION

As a field of cultural production, the fashion industry is considered by Bourdieu (1993a) to be constituted by the relationship between several subfields with varying power dependencies. Bourdieu's perspective suggests that there are status differences between segments within a market and larger societal forces that variably affect actors within the overall market. His work would support the conclusion that the women's plus-size fashion subset is less autonomous from the field of power than, for example, the subfield of haute couture (Hesmondhalgh 2006; Rocamora 2002). Haute couture is, for Bourdieu (1993b), the equivalent of "small-scale production," and it is concerned with the production of "pure" artistic products. In contrast, other subfields, such as that of plus-size fashion and children's wear, are oriented toward mass production and are centered on what Bourdieu frequently refers to as "commercial" cultural goods. This analysis helps to explain how two potentially incompatible logics—the logics of art and of commerce—can persistently coexist within a cultural field such as fashion. In essence, the logic of art can be dominant within some subfields (in particular haute couture), while the logic of

commerce may dominate others. As subfields intersect (e.g., haute couture designers develop ready-to-wear lines for certain segments), so do their respective dominant logics, to constitute the overall field of fashion.

Our empirical investigation, our review of academic literature on the fashion industry (Entwistle and Rocamora 2006), and our reading in the fashion press collectively suggest that the organizational field of fashion includes the following key actors: clothing marketers (designers, manufacturers, and retailers), fashion media, mainstream media who report on fashion, fashion associations, design and fashion schools, celebrities in their role of endorsers and lead users, and, of course, consumers (including those who are fashion bloggers). While male and female consumers are both part of this field, our focus is primarily on the latter, and particularly on female bloggers, as they have been leaders in agitating for field-level change. The number of fashion bloggers has been increasing, and this group has been having a visible impact on the fashion field (Wilson 2009). Constance White, veteran fashion editor and journalist, argues that bloggers are democratizing fashion: “Everybody’s a fashion critic. . . . Perhaps in five or 10 years, blogs will have the power to make unknown fashion designers into stars” (*Women’s Wear Daily*, February 6, 2006). Among fashion bloggers, we are particularly interested in those who write about plus-size fashion as our focus is primarily on the plus-size subset of the field.

Plus-size fashion has typically been defined as clothing that is sized 14 to as large as 72 (Winn 2004). Lane Bryant, which started as a maker of maternity clothes and began selling plus-size clothing in the 1920s, is considered a pioneer marketer in the field. Bryant researched measurements to establish how to outfit plus-sized women and proceeded to offer a full line for the “nearly 40% of all women who were larger in some or all of their dimensions than the perfect figure” (Bellafante 2010). Relatively few designers, manufacturers, or retailers followed suit. Indeed, since mass production of women’s clothing began, offerings for women who are “above average” have been limited relative to the portion of the population of that size and historically consumers in this segment have felt underserved (Stearns 1997).

A survey conducted in the United States in 1995 illustrates the persistence of this sentiment. It included 2,700 women aged 18 or older and showed that petite and plus-sized consumers had a significantly higher level of dissatisfaction regarding product availability, fashion selection, and brand offerings: 57% of the self-identified plus-sized consumers and 45% of petites said they had difficulty even finding stores that carried their size, and in those stores that did carry their sizes, 84% of the plus-sized and 62% of the petite felt that there was less selection in their size than in others. When asked if the choice of brand names was too limited in their size, 70% of the plus-sized and 48% of the petite women said “yes” (Friedman 1996). It is significant to note here that the focus of discontent is with mainstream marketers’ offerings. Plus-sized (and petite) women felt that too few name-brand clothing manufacturers created clothing

in their sizes and that too few of the popular clothing chains carried enough selections for their segment.

Evidence suggests that the problems persist. Commenting on a 2009 Mintel study of the plus-size market, their research director stated: “There is not a deep range of styles in stores devoted to plus-size. They’ll pick up on a single trend, it will dominate the floor space and that will be that” (Bellafante 2010). Marshal Cohen, chief industry analyst at the NPD Group, a market-research firm, says: “The plus-size business is often regarded as tertiary, ‘a stepchild.’ Retailers don’t nurture the business . . . so it leaves few players in the end” (Bellafante 2010). While statistics and specialists point to the profit potential of a plus-size market, designers and retailers in the apparel industry continue to be ambivalent about serving it (Euromonitor 2009). Popular retail chains such as Old Navy and Gap and brands such as Ann Taylor have recently removed larger sizes from brick-and-mortar stores, selling them exclusively online (Postrel 2009). Other retailers like Macy’s and Forever 21, who offer larger sizes in-store, restrict these to a very narrow selection of colors and patterns distributed unevenly across selected stores (Popken 2008). Ed Gribbin, president of Alvainsight, a division of size and fit specialist Alvanon, observes: “The plus size woman . . . wants what her missy counterparts have. . . . She doesn’t want a separate department with less selection and higher prices” (Hasham 2010). His comments indicate that even those within the industry recognize the ongoing frustration of plus-sized shoppers with limited choice provided by mainstream marketers.

Part of the explanation for the way the industry has evolved, or failed to evolve, arises from its two institutional logics introduced above: the logic of art and the logic of commerce. Consistent with the logic of art, highly regarded designers have a history of working independently from consumer needs. The very goal of iconic fashion marketers is to create innovative, influential trends that are in accordance with a vaguely defined spirit of the age. Ideally, their creations will then be diffused, adapted, and adopted by specific consumer segments, turning into objects of desire for most consumers (Tungate 2005). As a result, the wants and needs of consumers have often been disregarded relative to the artistic vision of designers. Given the widespread stigmatization of fat bodies (Bordo 1993; LeBesco 2005), it is not surprising that the consumer segment least attractive to marketers in this aesthetically oriented industry would be consumers whose bodies society typically deems unattractive. Reinforcing the point that plus-sized women in particular are not seen as a desirable target because they are regarded as aesthetically unappealing are attitudes such as those expressed by designer Karl Lagerfeld upon learning of a decision by H&M to produce larger sizes of his collection for the popular store. Lagerfeld was offended by the chain’s decision to produce the clothes in larger sizes and conveyed that his aesthetic vision excludes plus-sized people: “What I designed was fashion for slender and slim people. That was the original idea” (*Vogue United Kingdom* 2004).

Drawing from the logic of commerce, economic considerations are also raised as part of the rationale for the limited offerings available to plus-sized women. Marketers do frequently make the case that creating clothes for larger women requires investment in patterns and fabrics that are different from those used for petite or medium-sized women (Clifford 2010). This argument helps to explain why available fashionable clothes might be more costly per unit to produce. Yet it seems to overlook the fact that, in the United States, approximately 40% of the female population needs plus-size clothing (Bellafante 2010). Marketers who make occasional forays into the plus-size market almost invariably draw on the logic of commerce to support their decision. For example, when commenting on the retail chain's decision to expand plus-size offerings, a spokesperson for Target stated: "We definitely view this category as a growth opportunity" (Clifford 2010). Nevertheless, the selection of plus-size clothing on offer from mainstream retailers remains limited, and women with larger bodies continue to be frustrated with market offerings of fashionable apparel (Otieno, Harrow, and Lea-Greenwood 2005).

As they intersect with the field of fashion, the Fat Acceptance Movement and the Fatosphere become relevant to our study. We now discuss these aspects of our research context.

Fatness is widely considered a discrediting attribute, a physical and character stigma (Goffman 1986). People who are fat are widely regarded as pitiful, pathological, unfortunate, childlike, self-deluding, ugly, disgusting, and/or ignorant (Brownell et al. 2005; Hill 2009). Historical analysis indicates that the various forms of discrimination experienced by such people effectively reduce their opportunities in the job market, in school, at doctors' offices, and in the marketplace: "Fat people are often treated as not quite human entities to whom the normal standards of polite and respectful behavior do not seem to apply" (Farrell 2011, 6–7).

The field of fashion does not merely reflect these societal prejudices against fat; it intensifies them. Merkin (2010), a columnist for the *New York Times*, notes the tension between the discipline of an artistic vision and the disorderly potential of fleshy bodies:

Fashion, which has always been as much a narrative about the body as it is about clothes, has rarely taken kindly to the idea of flesh. Much as we may wax nostalgic about the Rubenesque ideal or the buxom, wide-hipped wenches of Restoration comedies, in its modern iteration fashion has steadily downsized the human scale. Flesh suggests messiness, privileging the indiscipline of life over the fierce control of art, the unaerobicized body spilling over the contours of an artificial silhouette, be it Christian Dior's New Look in 1947 or Marc Jacobs's New Look for Louis Vuitton this fall.

Merkin goes on to note, as have many fashion commentators, that in some seasons fashion marketers, inspired by popular television characters, such as the amply endowed Christina Hendricks of *Mad Men*, have featured some cur-

vier styles. Merkin (2010) insists, however, that "it's safe to say that flesh isn't going to become the new black anytime soon." Indeed, most evidence points toward a persistent and pervasive prejudice against fat, in the fashion field and beyond (Gesser-Edelsberg and Endevelt 2011). Scholars who study the persistence of the stigma associated with fat note that the contemporary discourse encouraging a war on obesity is a key factor perpetuating the problem (Farrell 2011). The idea that there is an obesity epidemic and that there should be a war on fat can be traced to C. Everett Koop, the US surgeon general in the 1990s. The discourse defines any individual with a body mass index (BMI) greater than 25 as obese, insists that fat is caused by an imbalance between calories consumed and calories expended, and argues that with diet and exercise all people can gain and maintain a BMI lower than 25. Proponents of this discourse do not engage with the evidence that weight loss is rarely sustainable or health-enhancing (Bacon et al. 2005). Nor do they recognize that the discourse treats people who are fat as a social problem to be cured, cloaking a moral denigration of people who are fat with the scientific authority associated with the term "obesity epidemic" (Gard and Wright 2005).

However, some of those who refer to themselves as fat have begun to challenge the demonization of, and discrimination against, larger bodies (Boero 2006; Oliver 2005). These individuals are members of what has been dubbed the Fat Acceptance Movement (Sturmer et al. 2003). While the movement predates the Internet, the ideals and values related to size acceptance gained force and popularity once they started to be publicized through online websites and blogs (Cooper 2009). A particularly vocal group of bloggers, spread globally over a net of interconnected blogs and social networking websites, have coalesced into an online collective known as the Fatosphere. Bloggers in the Fatosphere denounce the weight loss industry, question the rhetoric of obesity as an epidemic, and advocate the view that there can be "health at every size" (Cooper 2008; Rabin 2008).

Of particular interest in our project is the emergence from among those who participate in the Fatosphere of a group whose members share an interest in fashion choices. Specifically, we focus on those bloggers and blog followers who are concerned with choice in the fashion market, many of whom refer to themselves as Fatshionistas (Stewart 2009). The term "Fatshionista" is a play on words combining the neologism fashionista (used to designate a follower of the latest fashions [Merriam-Webster 2010]) with the adjective "fat," the negative connotations of which have been contested by participants in the Fat Acceptance Movement. Fatshionistas include consumers ranging from those who express interest in many issues, including fashion, and who express identification with the broader Fat Acceptance Movement, to those who discuss little else than their interests in fashion. Some who identify primarily with the Fat Acceptance Movement do not regard Fatshionistas altogether positively. Opponents of the Fatshionistas view preoccupation with fashion as trivial at best and as contrary to some goals of the movement at worst (LeBesco 2005). There

is, however, a partial overlap between membership in the Fat Acceptance and Fatshionista communities, and most of the latter endorse basic principles of the Fat Acceptance Movement, in particular acceptance of their body size (Kinzel 2010).

Online posts by consumers concerned with fashion and the limited plus-size options available have grown steadily over the past 5 years. These posts are often illustrated with photos of carefully produced outfits that seem meant to illustrate attractive images of plus-sized women wearing fashionable clothing (for an example, see fig. 1). Fashion bloggers and those who converse about their posts are central to our study, which we now describe.

METHOD

A qualitative study of the Fatshionista bloggers' and followers' quest to change the plus-size fashion market was

conducted in order to answer our research questions: What triggers prompt consumers to seek great inclusion in mainstream markets and a more satisfactory set of offerings from mainstream marketers? What strategies will consumers use when they seek greater inclusion and choice?

We initially set out to understand the broader context around which the Fatshionistas operate: the Fatosphere. In order to do so, we conducted a netnography, following the recommendations of Kozinets (2010). For more than 3 years, we followed the online interactions of bloggers and their audiences in the Fatosphere by observing, reading, and archiving selected posts and comments published in various blogs. We observed as full as possible an array of blogs addressing fat acceptance in order to achieve a rich understanding of the issues of importance for those who identify with the movement as a whole. We also participated by posting questions and commenting online. In addition, we

FIGURE 1

BLOGGER GABI GREGG ON *YOUNG, FAT, AND FABULOUS*



examined the offline activities of Fat Acceptance activists through interviews and through participation in a Fat Studies conference track. After this broader investigation, we narrowed our focus to an aggregate online news feed: *Notes from the Fatosphere*. This shift was based on the observation that the core issues for the Fat Acceptance Movement were discussed in the blogs included in the feed. It also served to keep the volume of data collected at reasonable levels while maintaining the initial breadth and variety of coverage. With the help of two trained research assistants, we systematically visited and coded the 89 blogs listed in *Notes from the Fatosphere* (as of July 2010) for the characteristics of authors and audiences; topics addressed; links to other blogs and websites; and references to products, services, brands, or marketing practices. We observed that, as the Fatosphere evolved, the feed started to incorporate an increasing number of blogs dedicated to plus-size fashion. Following that trend, we narrowed our sample to 10 blogs based on the frequency and regularity of their postings and the extent to which they discuss fashion and the fashion industry. The selected blogs (see table 1 for a description) were thoroughly read and all relevant content posted on these blogs from each blog's first post to December 2010 was collected. We also collected selected posts from the *LiveJournal Fatshionista* community referred to by bloggers, which helped to expose us to a wider range of members of the community. In addition, our data set on plus-size fashion includes the answers provided by eight bloggers who responded (via e-mail or blog post) to a series of questions we asked about their perceptions of the changes in the plus-size fashion market. This entire data set consists of 5,453 single-spaced pages of text and pictures from the sources described above. From this large data set, we selected and coded all content related to offerings and practices in the field of fashion. Each of the two authors independently coded the data. We then conferred, debated, and, iterating between the data and our conceptual structure, identified a set of triggers and strategies. Our coding was

influenced by our research questions, following guidelines offered by Miles and Huberman (1994, 62).

To complement data from the *Fatshionista* bloggers and followers, and to gain a more in-depth understanding of the current dynamics in the field of fashion, we examined media coverage of the plus-size fashion industry from 1995 to 2010 in three daily papers: *Women's Wear Daily (WWD)*, which covers business news and trends in fashion, beauty, and retail; the *Wall Street Journal (WSJ)*, which covers news on a wide range of industries; and the *New York Times (NYT)*, which covers a wider range of issues than either the *WSJ* or *WWD* and which is often chosen by scholars seeking to understand marketplace representations of consumption practices (Arsel and Thompson 2011; Humphreys 2010a). We chose to use American publications since the majority of the bloggers we studied appeared to be US-based.

Using the search engine for the Factiva database, we searched for all articles in the specified time range that had used both the term "plus-size" and the term "fashion" in the text or headlines of the articles. This yielded 624, 53, and 96 articles in *WWD*, *WSJ*, and *NYT*, respectively. One author then scanned each article to determine whether it contained any systematic commentary or analysis of the plus-size clothing industry. We excluded articles that reported on a single retailer that carried some plus-size clothing and articles about a single clothing line or designer. The number of articles that offered some industry-level analysis was 102, 3, and 28, in *WWD*, *WSJ*, and *NYT*, respectively.

Each of the articles that did discuss plus-size fashion at an industry level was coded with regard to how it characterized conditions in the industry or the actions of consumers or other institutional actors in the field. The analysis looked for evidence of institutional understandings of plus-sized consumers and of the opportunities and impediments to serving them. Insights from the media database supplemented those from the consumer posts.

TABLE 1
BLOGS CODED

| Blog | Date of creation | Topics discussed/focus | Coded data (single-spaced pages) |
|---|------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| <i>Big Fat Blog</i> | August 2000 | Fat acceptance, fat rights, and activism | 34 |
| <i>Big Fat Deal</i> | April 2007 | Body image, size, and the portrayal of weight in popular culture, media, and society | 60 |
| <i>Fat Girls Like Nice Clothes Too</i> | September 2008 | Plus-size fashion | 10 |
| <i>Jay Miranda</i> (former <i>Fatshionable</i>) | August 2009 | Plus-size fashion | 15 |
| <i>Nicolette Mason</i> | April 2006 | Travel, personal style, arts, cuisine, and fashion | 12 |
| <i>Shapely Prose</i> | September 2005 | Fat acceptance, feminism, media, fashion, self-image, fat politics | 119 |
| <i>The Curvy Fashionista</i> | December 2008 | Plus-size fashion | 11 |
| <i>The Rotund</i> | April 2007 | Body politics, beauty standards, clothes, makeup | 6 |
| <i>Two Whole Cakes</i> (former <i>The Fatshionista</i>) | December 2004 | Body politics, social justice activism, pop culture criticism, feminism | 95 |
| <i>GabiFresh</i> (former <i>Young, Fat and Fabulous</i>) | October 2008 | Plus-size fashion | 15 |

TRIGGERS OF THE QUEST FOR GREATER CHOICE AND MAINSTREAM MARKET INCLUSION

Through analysis of our data in light of institutional theory, we identify three triggers that help give rise to consumers' efforts to increase their inclusion within a market and the choices available to them. The first occurs when a segment that has been institutionally constituted by marketers coalesces into a community of consumers with a coherent identity. We refer to this as *collective consumer identity coalescence*. Collective consumer identities emerge when consumers within specific markets forge a collective identity based in part on the wants and needs that they perceive they share. The second factor is *identification of inspiring institutional entrepreneurs*. By this we mean that the collective observes and interprets the actions of an actor who is seen as capable of unsettling institutionalized practices as evidence that change is possible. The third factor is *finding support in institutional logics adjacent to the field*. This expression refers to a process wherein members of the collective learn about, and are able to draw on, a rationale from outside the focal market that legitimates their desires for more inclusion and choice within that market. We discuss each of these factors in turn.

Collective Consumer Identity Coalescence

The institutionalized fashion industry practice of segmenting women into petite, missy/junior, and plus-size provides a formative point of departure for a collective identity, as it groups together those who have common body sizes. A marketer-defined segment, however, does not necessarily constitute a collective identity to which consumers can relate and from which they will find insight or inspiration. Indeed, until the online Fat Acceptance Movement provided consumers with an opportunity to communicate and share ideas about larger bodies, those in the plus-size segment tended to interact only sporadically and in very small groups (Kinzel and Kirby 2011). Cooper, in a history of the fat activist movement that devotes specific attention to the emergence of lobbying for more fashion choices, states that "online community is central . . . to the intersection of fat, activism [and] fashion" (2008, 16). Online forums permit interaction, and in particular a form of "communicative action" (Habermas 1984), in a public sphere where there can be a mutual search for understanding entailing a "search for validity claims and an attempt to vindicate or criticize them through argumentation" (Habermas 1984, 18). Interaction is required for collective identity formation (White 1992), and the interaction that can take place in online forums allows for the type of deliberative process where individuals interact and coordinate their action based on agreed-upon interpretations of the situation (Habermas 1984, 86). Thus, as a subset of Fat Acceptance bloggers began to discuss their views on the fashion market and to attract followers with an interest in fashion, the opportunity for consumers to interact and forge

a meaningful, shared identity and a shared understanding of their situation was in place.

A particularly lively forum for this process has been the *Fatshionista LiveJournal* community, founded in 2004 by Amanda Piasecki (Cooper 2008). The profile of the *Fatshionista LiveJournal* is as follows:

Welcome, fatshionistas! We are diverse fat-positive, anti-racist, disabled-friendly, trans-inclusive, queer-flavored, non-gender-specific community, open to everyone. Here we will discuss the ins and outs of fat fashions, seriously and stupidly—but above all—standing tall, and with panache. We fatshionistas are self-accepting despite The Man's Saipan-made boot at our chubby, elegant throats. We are silly, and serious, and want shit to fit. (<http://fatshionista.livejournal.com/profile>)

While the community is inclusive and open, its communicative action has fostered one cardinal rule about what cannot be posted:

Fatshionista is not a place for the discussion of dieting or weight loss. Under any circumstances. Period. . . . This sort of conversation is explicitly contrary to the mandates of this community, the central pillar of which is size acceptance. (<http://fatshionista.livejournal.com/profile>)

The pillars of the identity crafted through this energetic *LiveJournal* community and through other fashion-related blogs include a shared desire for fashionable clothing; a shared difficulty in finding clothing that fits and looks as is desired; and a shared effort to practice and promote fat acceptance, starting with self-acceptance, especially of one's weight and shape. Consumer posts such as the following illustrate the elements of this identity:

I am having trouble finding skinny jeans I like, and hope that some of y'all can point me in the right direction. I'm severely apple-shaped—nothing but boobs and belly. Skinny jeans that fit my waist are too baggy in the butt and legs, but anything that's snug from the hips down tends to dig into my stomach like WHOA. I don't mind a little muffin top, but I'd rather not be in pain every time I sit down. I really want some jeans that fit my legs TIGHTLY—any ideas? . . . Also, I would love to hear about people's body-positive New Year's resolutions! Here are some of mine: Work out on a regular basis, NOT for weight loss, but for feeling strong and comfortable in my body, and getting better sleep; Go salsa dancing at least every other week, because it's fun and gets my heart racing; Wear clothes that fit me and make me feel awesome—if something is too small, get rid of it! (sweetlittlemary, *Fatshionista Live Journal*, January 3, 2010)

This quotation nicely illustrates that Fatshionistas do not want to change themselves to accommodate the market. Rather, they want the market to accommodate their size, tastes, and needs.

Of course, the coalescence of a consumer identity such as Fatshionista does not mean that all within a particular market segment share the identity. We argue only that for

consumers to become active in seeking greater market choice, the formation of a meaningful collective consumer identity is required. This point resonates with research on social movements, in which collective identity formation is a necessary precursor to mobilization (Sturmer et al. 2003). However, we observe that a collective consumer identity stands in stark contrast to the kinds of activist identities that animate anticonsumption movements. Anticonsumption activists identify themselves as having selfless social values of liberation and emancipation and as transcending the veil of consumerist ideology (Kozinets and Handelman 2004, 695–96). Some of those within the Fat Acceptance Movement who disparage the desire for fashionable clothing express such identities (LeBesco 2005). In contrast, Fatshionistas identify themselves as having shared consumption needs and desires that simply are not being met. This is reinforced in blog posts such as the following:

I am very comfortable with my size and have no wishes to change it. I have never had any problem with dating, employment or discrimination due to my size. In fact, the only downfall to being a “large” woman is shopping for fashion. Not only are the larger styles I see usually very unattractive, when I do find something I like in my size—especially if it is pants—it is ALWAYS too short. And the tall sizes are always too long. I thought 5’8” was considered a “model’s height,” yet who is the model for all these short pants which have enough room in the crotch area alone to carry a small dog??? Anyway, my point is, the only thing coming between me and my love of self is the shabby, sequined, moomoo styled clothing which is the majority of styles offered in the plus-size stores. Out of sheer desperation I purchased a sewing machine last week and plan to relearn the sewing skills I briefly used in my teen years. (Denise, *Big Fat Blog*, July 8, 2003)

As Denise’s post indicates, the key issues for her are the range of choice and where that choice can be accessed. The broader issues of weight-based discrimination are minimized relative to the frustrations of finding too few fashionable options and finding them only in plus-size stores.

Although Fatshionistas do not frame themselves as opponents of the fashion market or of marketers in general, they do feel marginalized by them relative to other market segments (petite and misses), as suggested by the following quote:

One of the things about most retailers who have several, separate lines of clothing is that for some reason, the plus-size clothes never seem to be anywhere close to as nice as the clothes in the other sizes. It’s like they design a whole cavalcade of items for their petites and their misses, and then go “Oh, shit! We forgot to think about the plus size clothes! Quick, make a sweater or something! Put some ruffles on that shit! Go gogo!” (Jenfu, *Big Fat Deal*, October 30, 2009)

This experience of being marginalized relative to other segments of consumers is not merely one of frustration at being offered fewer options. Lack of fashion options signifies a lack of legitimacy as a segment within the market.

This sense that lack of options equates with lack of legitimacy (particularly of the normative and cognitive types) is reinforced by Fatshionista bloggers in posts like the following:

For many of us who were fat as children and teens, clothes shopping was nothing short of tortuous. Even if our parents were supportive, the selection of “husky” or “half-sizes” for kids was the absolute pits. When that sort of experience is reinforced as a child, we often take it into adulthood. . . . We simply have been socialized not to expect better than to be treated as fashion afterthoughts. (Kimberly, *Big Fat Blog*, June 18, 2003)

While the coalescence of this consumer identity can potentially lead to mobilization to seek more choice from marketers, it need not necessarily do so. We observed that a common behavior among Fatshionistas was to engage in what might be regarded as collective coping with the market status quo. Specifically, Fatshionistas share ideas about how to make do with the limited fashion options available. Assembling and posting pictures of outfits that feature available brands is one very common means of sharing such information, as is writing reviews of plus-size garments available in online stores. In the following excerpt, blogger Lesley provides hyperlinks to a range of posts she has crafted to help her fellow Fatshionistas make the most of what is available in the market:

[In looking back over previous posts] I ran across a few seasonally-appropriate posts that may appeal to some folks who missed them the first time around. 1. Tutorial: Defrum-pifying a Cardigan: This is my first (and only) alteration tutorial, which I put together because The Public Demanded It. If you use it, or have used it in the past, please let me know how it worked out. 2. Belts for all, belts forever: I am pretty notoriously bad at being a Fatshion Authority Figure, but I felt compelled to talk about my belt obsession and how you, too, can wear a belt. 3. Lesley’s Late-Season and Therefore Possibly-Not-That-Useful Guide to Tights: I talk about the tights I like and don’t like, and why. This makes a nice companion piece to the annual exhaustive tights extravaganza on the *Fatshionista LiveJournal* community. (Lesley Kinzel, *Two Whole Cakes*, November 5, 2009)

Studies of market-marginalized, stigmatized consumers have provided insights on individual tactics for coping with the market status quo (Adkins and Ozanne 2005). Among Fatshionistas, we observe parallels at the collective level. Creative as these efforts are, and as much as they follow logically from the emergence of a collective identity, they do little to unsettle institutionalized practices. Thus, we argue that, in and of itself, collective identity coalescence is likely to be insufficient to mobilize consumers, though it is a necessary trigger.

Identification of Inspiring Institutional Entrepreneurs

Institutional entrepreneurs, as we have explained, are actors who attempt to change aspects of institutional fields and who are sometimes successful in doing so. Our data analysis suggests that bloggers and their audiences can collectively identify, and draw inspiration from, certain institutional entrepreneurs to whom they attribute agency in changing or at least challenging aspects of the market that they find unsatisfactory. We argue that when consumers can identify—and identify with—institutional entrepreneurs who they believe are actually challenging the status quo, they draw inspiration that encourages them to believe that they need not just cope with what they are offered by the market, but rather that they too can attempt to change the market.

A notable example of this process occurred as bloggers and followers discussed the actions and achievements of American indie-rock singer Beth Ditto. Ditto (who weighs more than 200 pounds and is slightly more than 5 feet tall [Brownstein 2009]) has achieved considerable celebrity not only for her music but also for her defiant persona. Building on that celebrity, she has branched out from her career as a singer to launch a fashion line in cooperation with retailer chain Evans. She has also participated in fashion modeling, and, in 2010, she was the opening model for Jean Paul Gaultier at Paris Fashion Week, a coveted spot for any aspiring model (Parmentier and Fischer 2011).

Among Fatshionistas, Ditto and other fat activist celebrities like her are the topic of considerable discussion. The comment below was posted by a blogger discussing a distinctive stretchy dress with a black and white domino print that was part of the Ditto/Evans collection.

Any fashionable fatty could spot it a mile off and know what it was and where it came from immediately. I was really dubious this dress could be worked. The novelty print! The stretch knit! I'm being honest, and I've been a staunch defender of the Ditto/Evans collaboration. However, I'm happy to report I was wrong. . . . She looks fabulous, and provides a nice illustration of one of my Fatshionista maxims: You can't let plus-size fashion run you, kids. You gotta take control and bend it to your will." (Lesley Kinzel, *Two Whole Cakes*, July 22, 2009)

Ditto may or may not regard herself as an institutional entrepreneur, and she may or may not be having much effect on the fashion industry as a whole. The key point is that her actions and achievements are construed by Fatshionistas as making the industry more accommodating of "fashionable fatties." The last two sentences of Lesley's post urge her followers to see Ditto as "taking control." Here, taking control means working within the fashion system to expand the range of choice for plus-sized consumers. Ditto's achievements are interpreted by Fatshionistas as an indication that the field of fashion—in particular the plus-size segment—can be changed.

Another institutional entrepreneur with whom some Fat-

shionistas identify is plus-sized model Crystal Renn. Renn, a former regular (i.e., size 00 or 0) model who suffered from anorexia, became a plus-size model after regaining her health and a body size that reportedly varied between the sizes 16 and 6. Renn is notable for her editorial photos in high-end fashion magazines and has been chosen by Dolce & Gabbana, Chanel, and Jimmy Choo to model their creations in international print campaigns. While Fatshionistas debate Renn's weight fluctuations and her ability to represent women who are at the larger end of the body size spectrum, they still draw inspiration from her, as the post by Jenfu illustrates:

I want beautiful, healthy women of all sizes to be represented in fashion; I want magazines to show women who are so-called "average" and "normal" (sizes 12–14), and I want magazines to show plus-size ladies all up and down the range of body types and sizes. I get angry when I see only size zeros with legs up to their ears, as if there is no other choice in beauty. And I want Crystal Renn to just be the first of an avalanche. She was featured recently in an issue of the Australian *Harper's Bazaar* (note: avoid the comments) and the photos are beautiful. They don't appear to have been touched up to recontour her thighs or to redesign her figure to make her more "acceptably" plus-size—her body and its curves are high-fashion. They are showcased, and the effect is stunning—particularly when your eye has been trained, for so long, to equate "high-fashion" with "incredibly skinny." She's hardly "fat," but it is wonderful to see larger sized bodies taken seriously by a fashion magazine. What do you guys think? (Jenfu, *Big Fat Deal*, May 19, 2009)

It is worth noting that while there may be other institutional entrepreneurs in the fashion field whose efforts can result in changes that would address some of the issues concerning Fatshionistas, not all institutional entrepreneurs are inspiring. For example, we could find little evidence that consumers were motivated by the retailer Evans or by designer Jean Paul Gaultier, both of whom collaborated with Beth Ditto in ways that might lead to some desired field-level changes, and who could therefore be regarded as institutional entrepreneurs as well. Thus, it is not necessarily the case that consumers will be triggered to seek changes when any actor takes steps that might change the field in ways they value. Our evidence suggests that it is more likely the case that consumers will be inspired by those whom they regard as being like themselves in some ways.

Parallels and distinctions can be drawn between the process of identification of inspirational institutional entrepreneurs that we highlight here and the collaboration between consumers and entrepreneurs described in the counter-co-optation process discussed by Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007). In their context, entrepreneurs shared with consumers an interest in commercializing reclaimed countercultural values and creating a separate market that conformed to those values. Both entrepreneurs and the consumers to whom they catered eschewed mainstream marketers and their organic food offerings. In contrast, in our context, neither consumers nor

those they consider institutional entrepreneurs are trying to escape the mainstream market. There is no desire for some communal space where consumers limit their exchanges to small operators with whom they share values. Instead, consumers infer that institutional entrepreneurs like Ditto and Renn signify that it is possible for a greater range of practices (e.g., creating fashionable plus-size options and images) to become institutionalized.

Finding Support in Institutional Logics Adjacent to the Field

The third factor that can help trigger consumers into active efforts to achieve desired changes is the availability of institutional logics beyond the focal field that lend support to consumers' longing for inclusion in a mainstream market. In our context, these logics are situated in the field constituted by the Fat Acceptance Movement. Those Fatshionistas who identify with and participate in the Fat Acceptance Movement are exposed to its logics as well as to the logics of the fashion field. They can find, in the logics of the Fat Acceptance Movement, rationales that support and animate their quest for greater inclusion in the mainstream fashion market. Drawing on the civil rights movement, the Fat Acceptance Movement postulates that differentiating between people based on their size is an unacceptable form of discrimination against a stigmatized group (Solovay 2000). We refer to this as the *logic of human rights*. According to Fat Acceptance activists, *sizeism* toward people who are fat assumes several forms, including the lack of accommodation for larger bodies at spaces such as hospitals, universities, theaters, and airplanes. Consistent with this line of reasoning, the exclusion of larger sizes from the range available at major clothing chains is construed by Fatshionistas embedded in the Fat Acceptance Movement as a manifestation of prejudice against people who are fat. Consequently, fighting for inclusion in the field of fashion, as would be signified if mainstream marketers routinely stocked a range of plus-size options proportional to the size of the segment, has political significance to many Fatshionistas. The post quoted below illustrates this point:

Let's not underestimate the power of fashion to make us feel good about ourselves. Stores like Torrid . . . are revelatory experiences for many young fat people. . . . The fact that these options exist can be, curiously, a powerful political awakening for a lot of kids. It's been said for years now that making plus sizes available to young people only encourages fatness; it doesn't. It encourages self-esteem. It encourages confidence. And if you're against that, then I don't care to know you. (Lesley Kinzel, *Two Whole Cakes*, July 14, 2009)

According to the tenets of the Fat Acceptance Movement, body and size acceptance better equip people who are fat to fight against discrimination. Opposition to making choices available is construed by participants in the movement as a further demonization and oppression of people who are fat. The movement also stresses that the inclusion of more pos-

itive representations of fat bodies in media and popular culture will help combat weight-based discrimination. Even using the term "fat" in a deliberate manner, as Fat Acceptance activists purposefully do, is intended to confront the stigma by making it more visible (Cooper 2008). We refer to this logic as the *logic of visibility*, and we argue that it legitimates the desires of Fatshionistas for clothing options that they can use to create and make visible confrontational, yet attractive, images of themselves. The following post speaks to this connection:

In my world, letting the outline of your belly show in a dress, or wearing something sleeveless that doesn't hide your arm fat isn't just ok, it's appreciated. Tight clothes on fat bodies are inherently political, and I would even say more so when those tight clothes look damn good and are worn with pride. (Guest blogger, *Two Whole Cakes*, February 16, 2009)

While it is possible that Fatshionistas would be mobilized to seek greater choice without the benefit of the Fat Acceptance Movement's logics of human rights and of visibility, it seems that these logics provide Fatshionistas with a rationale that elevates their quest. As Henry (2010) has noted, there are many countervailing discourses in broader society that can discourage consumers from taking action in support of market choice. We posit that the availability of logics from adjacent fields that exert pressure on mainstream marketers or attract the attention of other actors to their quest lend important support to consumers who are frustrated with the field.

CONSUMER STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING MARKET CHOICE

The strategies of consumers who seek to expand their choices within an institutionalized market where they feel marginalized can be compared and contrasted to those of actors who seek to make more drastic changes and challenge the core values of organizational fields. Anticonsumer activists seeking changes to the ideology and culture of consumerism, for example, can deploy rhetorical frames that demonize both "large corporate puppeteers" and "idiots and foolish consumers" (Kozinets and Handelman 2004, 697, 700). Consumers championing social utilitarian values in oppositional market dramas played out in cultural creative markets can likewise use framing strategies to depict mainstream market actors as "shameless, greedy" capitalists and industrial "monsters" (Giesler 2008, 745, 747).

In a context where consumers do not seek to undermine the dominant logic of an organizational field, but rather want to amend selected institutional practices that limit the choices offered by mainstream marketers, some similar strategies do surface. We observe that specific market actors are "framed" (Seo and Creed 2002; Snow and Benford 1992) as being responsible for the limited options available to women. The following blog post is typical in this regard:

"A business runs by manufacturing what sells. . . ." You'd think so. But it's not that simple. Especially in the clothing business, where (sound of millions of throats clearing) Image is Every-

thing. An awful lot of clothing stores, especially “high-end” ones, simply don’t want fat women (or even “slightly chubby” ones) to be shopping there, because they think thin women have more money (not entirely wrong on that, alas) and they believe thin women who care about being chic won’t shop in a store where fat(ter) women can buy the same things. And a lot of it comes from the designers, too. . . . They think if they make larger sizes, only fat women will buy their clothes, and they’ll lose their credibility with the fashionistas. (Andee Joyce, *Big Fat Blog*, January 21, 2003)

This post assigns blame for impoverished fashion choices to elites within the fashion world (high-end retailers, famous designers). It reflects and invokes both the logic of human rights and the logic of visibility to highlight the problematic practices in the industry. Note, however, that even here, the underlying message is that individual actors should be scolded for their prejudices against a particular segment, not so much that the organizational field of fashion as it is must be revolutionized. While such scolding might suffice if the goal was to overthrow elites in the field of fashion, it stops short of serving the purposes of Fatshionistas. When consumers’ objectives are not to undermine powerful actors so much as to gain inclusion and increased choices, more constructive strategies are required. The cumulative pattern of the actions taken by the Fatshionistas builds up into strategies (Mintzberg 1978) that can be grouped into three interrelated, mutually reinforcing categories: appealing to institutional logics, publicizing desirable institutional innovations and persistent institutional impediments, and allying with more powerful institutional actors.

Appealing to Institutional Logics

While in other contexts (e.g., music consumers studied by Giesler [2008]) consumers have explored contradictions in institutional logics to develop their claim, the Fatshionistas are in agreement with the coexisting logics of commerce and art that inform institutional practices in the field of fashion broadly defined. In numerous posts, bloggers and their followers make appeals to these institutional logics in an effort to convince marketers that more fat-fashion choices should be made available. Appeals to the logic of commerce are often laced with sarcasm, hyperbole, and/or humor. The following post is illustrative:

When it comes to plus size fashion, plus size customers [are] begging to be treated . . . as any other customer who ought to be wooed, who ought to be looked at as an advantage, a sales opportunity. . . . That companies need to be brow-beaten, slapped around until they’re woken up and realize they have customers who are begging to be treated like fountains of money? I still can’t believe they’re that dumb, and willing to throw away that much business. (Jenfu, *Big Fat Deal*, June 16, 2009)

In addition to such general posts that make the case that there is profit to be made in meeting the unmet needs, Fatshionistas also identify how specific marketers could serve

them more effectively and meet greater commercial success as a result. The following post from blogger Kate Harding is illustrative:

Bathing suit shopping just sucks, period. I didn’t find it much easier when I wore a common straight size. But at least I knew I could walk into several different stores and find options in “my size,” even though most of them wouldn’t fit me right anyway. As a fatty, I pretty much have my choice of Target or Wal-Mart—which would be fine . . . if they carried suits that work on my body. But they don’t. . . . So I’ve compiled a list of requests I wish everyone making bathing suits for fatties would take into consideration.

- If you’re a retailer that sells both online and off, put some . . . suits in your bricks and mortar stores. You don’t have to put the entire line there, but could we please have a handful?
- There has to be a happy medium between fabric that “takes 10 pounds off” while squashing your internal organs into a single blob, and see-through, lightweight shit that has no stretch left after it’s been in a pool twice. Please find it.
- If you are a retailer who sells both straight and plus sizes, don’t have the same bathing suit available in 19 different colors for thin people and just black, brown, and navy for fat ones. . . . It feels like a slap in the face, and you can only slap your customers in the face for so long before they start wondering who else might need their money more. (Kate Harding, *Shapely Prose*, March 22, 2009)

Both such product-specific posts and those that speak of the limited offerings in general suggest that marketers who fail to offer fashion choices to women who are fat are violating the commercial logic that is one pillar of this organizational field (as in so many other fields). Fatshionistas thus imply that marketers are forgoing profits due to prejudices against fat bodies. Through posts like these, bloggers convey that providing more offerings to plus-sized consumers is the right thing to do not simply on moral grounds (people should not be discriminated against because of their size) but also on economic ones.

Fatshionistas do not, however, limit themselves to appeals based on forgone profit potential. They also appeal to the other foundational logic in the field of fashion, the logic of art. In doing so, they attempt to illustrate, through the outfits they compose and the modifications they make to clothes, that Fatshionistas can conform to the industry’s aesthetic ideals. One example in this regard is blogger Nicolette Mason, who favors high-end designers and luxury brands. She notes:

If there’s a style or particular garment I love (or even like) that I can’t easily find to fit my curves or my fat (and I say this lovingly, not self-deprecatingly), I modify, customize, and unleash my creativity to simply make it work. I refuse to be limited by off-the-rack options. Fashion is a huge part of who I am . . . and frankly I’d be doing myself an enormous disservice by writing off companies, designers, and even fashion magazines and editorials that only cater to people “like me.” (Nicolette Mason, October 26, 2010)

FIGURE 2

BLOGGER JAY MIRANDA



Nicolette creates and posts aesthetically appealing images by adapting clothes that are marketed to women of smaller sizes. Along the same lines, Jay Miranda is a blogger who founded *fatshionable.com* “in an effort to show that women can be both plus size and chic.” Nicolette, Jay, and others like them thus manage to create ensembles that are as varied as those available to consumers who fit slimmer clothes: there are bold looks, edgy looks, and romantic, vintage, and minimalist styles. Considerable effort is expended on making these aesthetically appealing images, as explained by blogger Sweet Machine: “There is a whole world of creative people out there who look awesome in clothing, and it’s not because they spend five days a week doing ass workouts. It’s because they use their fabulous minds rather than their six-pack abs to decide what to wear” (Sweet Machine, *Shapely Prose*, August 11, 2009).

Naturally, consumers striving to appeal to the logic of art often use visual images in order to do so. Consistent with

the aesthetic standards of the field, the photographs posted by Nicolette and other *Fatshionistas* are similar to those illustrating the pages of high-end fashion magazines. The outfits composed by the bloggers tell whatever audience is listening that consumers who are fat can consume fashion in ways that resonate with the artistry valued in the industry. Figures 2 and 3 include images that typify the effort to appeal to the fashion industry’s logic of art.

It is useful to contrast this process of appealing to institutional logics with the one outlined by Giesler (2008) that entailed efforts by consumers to exploit contradictory logics (Dorado 2005; Fligstein 1997; Seo and Creed 2002). In Giesler’s context, consumers sought to undermine the dominant market logic of possessive individualism that typically prevails in the music industry. They did so by appealing to a conflicting logic also present in the field, that of social utilitarianism. In our context, consumers’ strategies tend to favor appealing to both fashion logics rather than exploiting whatever tensions there may be

FIGURE 3

BLOGGER NICOLETTE MASON



between them. This makes sense, given that Fatshionistas are appreciative of both the logics in the field. Indeed, they want not just widely available options (consistent with the logic of commerce) but beautiful, edgy, and nonconformist options (consistent with the logic of art). Thus, here we see less an effort to undermine one of the extant logics than an effort to expand institutional practices that are consistent with both logics. Publicizing desirable institutional innovations and persistent institutional impediments, the strategy we discuss next, is also instrumental to this goal.

Publicizing Desirable Institutional Innovations and Persistent Institutional Impediments

Fatshionistas frequently single out and try to support institutional actors who innovate in ways that please them. They publicly recognize—and encourage one another to patronize—those marketers who do go some distance toward meeting their needs. In providing positive online word-of-mouth (Kozinets et al. 2010), Fatshionistas help to articulate what they want and indicate that they will patronize market actors who

take initiatives that increase the range of choice open to them. The following post is typical in this regard.

When a commenter stopped by to alert me to the new store Lucie Lu, I thought “It’s so rare that there’s a new plus size store with cute stuff. I’m going to review this place on the blog.” . . . Lucie was nice enough to send me a few things to review for you . . . So, how does Lucie Lu stack up to other plus size clothing shops online? Well, if you care a lot about natural fabrics you are still out of luck with Lucie Lu—this stuff is definitely made out of Vaseline and dead dinosaurs, or whatever they make synthetic fabrics from. This doesn’t bother me a bit but I know it bothers some people. Sizes go up to 5x, but . . . they run small and don’t offer everything in 4x and 5x. . . . In my personal opinion, style-wise the clothes are miles above most stores, on average. . . . and I’m excited to see what could be non-mommish but not overly juniors-ish jeans. But a store for hip plus clothes that aren’t just for teenagers is only a valuable resource if they actually fit plus-sized people. If you wear a 4x or larger by their size chart and like the stuff, make a noise. . . . Newer shops will sometimes listen. (Fillyjonk, *Shapely Prose*, February 12, 2010)

As this quotation illustrates, Fatshionistas use positive word-of-mouth deliberately to praise what they like and lobby for more of it. While Fillyjonk acknowledges that Lucie Lu is expanding the choice for some plus-sized women, she is quick to point out that the offerings still meet the needs of only portions of the segment and to encourage other plus-sized consumers to ask that their needs also be met. Thus, Fatshionistas use their publicity of institutional innovations not only to demonstrate what they like but to provide insight into what more could be done to meet their needs.

At the same time they praise institutional innovations, Fatshionistas can also use their blogs to point out institutionalized practices that serve as impediments to change. For example, blogger Kate Harding highlights a development in the field that she believes has the potential to be positive (Forever 21 creating a plus-size line), but then she uses the same post to bemoan the limited choices available (which perpetuates the problem facing most Fatshionistas):

Forever 21 is launching a plus-size line, called Faith 21, starting in May. That’s the good news. The bad news? “Junior plus sizes include XL, 1X and 2X.” Dude, they didn’t even have XL before? *Junior* XL? Sigh. And of course they stop at 2X. And of course it’s a junior 2X. . . . So this appears to be one more store introducing a so-called plus line that amounts to them extending sizes all the way up to . . . the smallest possible “plus size.” . . . So, you know, this is the sound of one hand clapping. Having griped, however, I will say that “plus lines” like this are a godsend for true in-betweenies. And having been thin, fat, and in-between, I really believe that’s got to be the second most frustrating size range, after 26+. . . . So on behalf of my in-betweenie sisters, I’m excited about this and hope it does well. On behalf of all fatties, I’m excited about a baby step in the right direction from a company I really never expected to make the

slightest pretension to giving a rat’s ass about the plus market. But it is no more than a baby step. . . . They’re only launching Faith 21 in a few markets at first to see if it’s worth doing elsewhere. . . . So let’s just say you will not be seeing my surprised face if it turns out they chuck the whole thing after three months, claiming the market just wasn’t there. (Kate Harding, *Shapely Prose*, March 4, 2009)

In this post, Harding draws attention to a pattern that Fatshionistas have observed and that leads to what they regard as an unwarranted conclusion that plus-size markets can’t be profitably served: the marketing practice of launching plus-size lines in a limited number of stores for a limited period of time and of drawing conclusions based on insufficient evidence that “the market just wasn’t there.” Through their selective celebration of those marketers whom they see as meeting their wants and needs, Fatshionistas are not only supporting these marketers in their deviation from the practice of offering few fat-fashion choices; they are also attempting to draw attention to, and to criticize, marketing practices that perpetuate the problem of restricted choices for consumers in their segment.

Allying with More Powerful Institutional Actors

As marginalized actors within the field of fashion, plus-sized consumers lack material and immaterial resources that are typically required by institutional change agents (DiMaggio 1988). We posit that, through alliances with institutional actors who have higher profiles and who can communicate with wider audiences, consumers can lessen the impact of their limited resources.

In our context, we observe that connections to other actors in the field typically happen once a Fatshionista has come to be seen as influential among her peers; in Bourdieuan terms, Fatshionistas who are followed by a large number of their fellow consumers can be regarded as having acquired greater symbolic capital in the field. Once they have done so, these high-profile Fatshionistas are often approached by more powerful market actors who are interested in capitalizing on their influence. An example in this regard is Gabrielle Gregg, who created the fashion blog *Young, Fat, and Fabulous (YFF)*. *YFF* focuses on the discussion of outfits, fashion brands, and styles independent of sizes. Gabrielle, or Gabi, sees the blog’s purpose as disseminating “a message beyond fashion, about accepting yourself at any size, and feeling stylish” (Lyons 2010). After blogging for some time, Gabi entered and won a contest by MTV to become the network’s first Twitter Jockey, which further raised her profile within and beyond the Fatshionista community. Through her blog and her MTV exposure, Gabi accumulated a sizable audience (12,000 plus Twitter followers and 7,000 plus Facebook likes as of May 2011). As Gabi’s visibility within and beyond her community grew, she was invited to be a guest blogger for plus-size retailers including Faith 21 (the plus-size brand of Forever 21) and Evans. Eventually, she was invited by the prestigious *Vogue Italia* to produce fash-

ion videos that are posted on *VogueCurvy*, an online feature of the magazine.

Such alliances with powerful actors can provide Fatshionistas with credibility and with visibility, enabling them to attempt to extend their influence further within the organizational field. For example, Gabi Gregg's accumulation of symbolic capital in the field enabled her to attract several sponsors when, in 2010, she organized a conference for "fatshion bloggers" from all over the world for a weekend of discussions about plus-size fashion. Gabi acknowledged, and further reinforced her alliances, through the website she created for the event, posting: "Love love love to all of our sponsors who helped make this weekend possible: Torrid, Faith21, Evans, We Love Colors, SimplyBe, American Rag, City Chic, ModCloth, and Boutique Larrioux" (Gabi, *YFF*, July 17, 2010). By linking marketers and plus-size fashion bloggers, Gabi has helped to increase the visibility of the unmet wants and needs of plus-sized consumers.

Fatshionistas have also accepted overtures from mainstream marketers that enable them to have a very direct influence in shaping the specifics of fashion offerings. For example, Marie Denee, a blogger for *The Curvy Fashionista*, described to her readers how she had collaborated with upscale retailer Nordstrom to influence the line of clothing it was introducing:

On a mission to deliver a new fashion perspective . . . to its department, Nordstrom embarked upon creating a new brand—but they wanted to make sure they got it right. So, a few months ago, I was contacted by Nordstrom—along with a few other leading plus size bloggers—to work with them on their new collection, Sejour. After sending in our measurements—quite detailed—Nordstrom sent out samples to us for review, asked for our thoughts, and initiated direct feedback with their designers to bring this new line to their more forward Encore shopper. Excited and nervous (because I wanted to love them), I agreed to participate—I mean, hey, what better way to help develop the selections available to the plus size woman! (Marie Denee, *Curvy Fashionista*, October, 2010)

Other fat-fashion bloggers have similarly cooperated with marketers in an effort to increase fashionable offerings and to increase the legitimacy of the practice of offering greater choice. For example, in 2010, 13 bloggers participated in a day-long event named *Size Is Sexy* that previewed Lane Bryant's fall and holiday sportswear collections. By participating in this event, bloggers had access to Lane Bryant executives and merchants via exclusive presentations and round table discussions. A similar initiative in which Fatshionista bloggers participated as speakers was a *Style Symposium* organized by Hanes.

By taking advantage of connections to fashion media, retailers, and designers to raise the profile of their wants and needs and to influence how those needs are met, Fatshionistas adopt a strategy that institutional theorists (Battilana, Leca, and Boxenbaum 2009) posit is common for actors who are marginal to a field. That is, they leverage

the resources—including the legitimacy—of more powerful institutional actors in support of the institutional changes they seek. At the same time, they may advance their personal interests, which is possible because these personal interests and those of the Fatshionista collective are not in conflict.

It is interesting to contrast the behavior of Fatshionistas with that of would-be countercultural consumers such as those studied by Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007). Whereas consumers of organic foods resented and resisted the co-optation of their values by mainstream marketers, Fatshionistas actively seek and willingly accept opportunities to ally with mainstream fashion marketers. Again, we posit this is because Fatshionistas largely accept the institutional logics that prevail in the field and primarily seek to amplify certain institutional practices so that they can gain access to more of what the industry has to offer.

DISCUSSION

Our research has focused on identifying why consumers become engaged in seeking greater inclusion in a market and on the institutional work they engage in when doing so. In addressing our research questions, we identified three factors that increase the chances of consumer mobilization: the coalescence of a collective consumer identity, the identification of institutional entrepreneurs within the field from whom consumers draw inspiration, and the leveraging of logics adjacent to the field that lend support to consumers' longings within it. We further identified three strategies consumers engage in: appealing to institutional logics, publicizing desirable institutional innovations and persistent institutional impediments, and allying with powerful institutional actors. We now discuss implications of our work, comparing it with prior research and pointing toward implications for work to come.

Why Consumers Engage in Efforts to Change Markets

In one of the few earlier articles that look at why consumers engage in or fail to engage in trying to change markets, Henry (2010) studied the way consumers think about their rights and responsibilities. He ultimately raised questions about the mechanisms that either mute or amplify the tendency for consumers to try to secure what they regard as that to which they are entitled in marketplaces. Henry focused on ideological factors as mechanisms of interest. In particular, he identified the culturally pervasive ideology of consumer sovereignty as an enabler and the ideology of corporate dominance as a barrier to consumer engagement in change efforts.

Our insights suggest that to understand why consumers might mobilize to pursue what they regard as their rights, it is important to attend not only to broad cultural ideologies but also to dynamics in organizational fields. Indeed, when discussing the particular dynamics (or lack thereof) in the credit card market, Henry (2010, 683) noted that when consumers are "disconnected"—as are credit card consumers—they are unlikely to attempt to secure what they want from markets, since they view problems as "individual . . .

rather than shared.” Our findings, which are deliberately attentive to field-level factors, suggest that indeed there is unlikely to be much consumer mobilization until or unless a collective consumer identity coalesces among a segment of consumers who feel acutely that their needs are not being met. Other examples of consumers who formed collective consumer identities are celiac patients, who have congregated around their shared need for gluten-free products and gluten-free manufacturing processes (<http://www.celiac.ca>) and the middle class women studied by Sandicki and Ger (2010), who voluntarily adopted the stigmatized practice of veiling as part of their larger identification with the tenets of their Islamic faith.

We highlighted that, in our context, the establishment of online forums enabled consumers to identify with one another, to question entrenched suppositions and practices, and to form an understanding of preferred practices, or, in other words, to engage in communicative action (Habermas 1984) that questions the rationality of practices enacted by mainstream marketers. However, we regard online forums as neither necessary nor sufficient for this purpose. A key question for future research is to examine what other contextual dynamics in an organizational field might foster collective identity formation and communicative action among consumers that can mobilize them to see and to seek market changes they desire.

We also note that the formation of a collective consumer identity and of communicative action alone is not likely to be sufficient for consumer mobilization within a field. As our findings indicate, institutional entrepreneurs with whom consumers identify also play a vital role in encouraging consumers to take action to achieve the changes they desire. Inspirational examples within a market can encourage consumers to call into question the inevitability of the status quo within that field. To support this claim, we look not only at our context but also at the one studied by Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007). Although there are differences between the sources of inspiration in our context and theirs, it appears that consumer mobilization in both markets was influenced by institutional entrepreneurs with whom consumers identified and from whom they took inspiration.

Future research on market dynamics in other contexts will benefit from investigating other kinds of institutional entrepreneurs who might inspire change efforts. In particular, we need to understand the circumstances under which individual consumers can effectively become institutional entrepreneurs and inspire other consumers who identify with them. We speculate that this occurs when individual consumers can accumulate symbolic capital within the organizational field and when they use this capital to exert symbolic power in an attempt to change a field (Bourdieu 1989). Indeed, there is some evidence, within our context, that individual consumers are developing the potential to be institutional entrepreneurs owing to their accumulation of symbolic capital and their efforts to exert symbolic power.

Bourdieu (1989) provides an analysis of how symbolic power can be wielded to change “the vision of the world”

within a field. Elsewhere, he articulates the vision of the world that prevails within the field of fashion (Bourdieu 1993b; Bourdieu and Delsaut 1975). According to Bourdieu (1989, 23), those with symbolic capital in a field may have the “power of constitution,” that is, the power to change the field through acts of representation that make a preferred vision more visible and through attempts to transform categories used to subjectively perceive and evaluate the social world. Drawing on these works, we maintain that even though the majority of plus-sized consumers collectively comprise a category of actors who lack legitimacy in the fashion field, certain bloggers can manage to accumulate considerable symbolic capital, thereby differentiating themselves from their legitimacy-lacking peers. Thus, consumer bloggers like Gabi Gregg may indeed have the potential to act and to be perceived as institutional entrepreneurs who can effectively shape a new vision that reconciles fat with fashionable within the field. As of yet, however, their ability to actually achieve the changes that they seek may be limited owing to the marginalized status in society as a whole of people who are fat. An interesting opportunity for future research would be to examine market dynamics in a context where consumers gain symbolic capital (whether by blogging or some other means), and want to change some institutionalized aspect of the market (and therefore can be regarded as institutional entrepreneurs), but where they are not members of a stigmatized group.

We also regard it as important that there be future research on logics that may catalyze consumers’ change efforts. In our work we have highlighted the importance of the availability of logics from institutional fields adjacent to the focal organizational field that support desired changes within that field. We believe our findings resonate with those of Sandicki and Ger (2010); the veiled consumers they studied initially drew on the logics of modesty and virtue provided by the Islamic faith to justify their choice for a then-stigmatized fashion consumption practice. Thus, in their context, as in ours, logics from adjacent fields were instrumental in mobilizing consumers to seek change. In contrast, in Giesler’s (2008) study of music downloaders, the availability of competing logics within the music field itself supported and animated consumers’ quests for change. Future research is required to investigate the same market dynamics in organizational fields that have no competing logics, and in organizational fields where few consumers are invested in adjacent fields that could provide them with an alternative logic. Given embedded agency, it remains for now unclear how consumer change efforts will be mobilized in such contexts.

If we are to fully develop our understanding of the conditions that will support or diminish the likelihood that consumers will seek market changes, then it seems essential to consider not only cultural-level factors but also those at the level of the organizational fields in which consumers operate. We believe this is also true if we are to understand the kinds of market change dynamics that are likely to happen when consumers become engaged in seeking other types of market change, which we discuss next.

How Do Consumers Affect Market Dynamics?

In introducing our findings, we made selective comparisons with other works that have studied consumers' efforts to seek other kinds of changes to markets. Here we systematize and extend those comparisons in an effort to advance our understanding of market dynamics. We do so by creating a stylized representation of different kinds of market contexts that draws attention to two dimensions that facilitate comparison between our context and those of prior studies: the relative legitimacy of the consumer segment seeking change and the desires of that segment with regard to the mainstream market. Table 2 captures these insights. We preface our discussion by noting that any classification such as this must be regarded as an oversimplification of reality that cannot convey the full range of types of markets or the full complexity of their dynamics over time. That said, such classifications are useful didactic tools that help us to make sense of the variety we observe across market contexts. To aid in this sense-making exercise, we begin by elaborating on the two axes that structure that figure.

How Consumers Are Perceived in the Mainstream Market. We suggest that to understand market change dynamics, one important factor to consider is the relative legitimacy of consumers in an extant market. In general, some consumers (those targeted by multiple mainstream marketers) may have greater legitimacy in markets, while other segments may have less legitimacy and consequently may be targeted by no mainstream marketers or by very few. Drawing on institutional theory and on our study of Fatshionistas, we came to characterize plus-sized consumers as lacking legitimacy in the mainstream fashion market. We reason that plus-sized consumers lack normative legitimacy in the wider society in which the organizational field of fashion is situated. The self-acceptance implied by Fatshionistas' desires for fashionable clothing is at odds

with the norms of acceptable behavior in the larger social system, which suggest that people who are fat should feel ashamed and should attempt to reduce, hide, or disguise their bodies (Farrell 2011). Plus-sized consumers also lack cultural-cognitive legitimacy, in that being fat and fashionable does not appear to fit with existing cognitive and cultural schemas that deem fat as undesirable and associate beauty with slender bodies (Merkin 2010). Moreover, plus-sized fashion consumers also lack regulatory legitimacy within the market, given that their desire for more choice is not being sanctioned by explicit rules or policies and that there is still minimal regulation in North America regarding size-based discrimination in the market (Oliver 2005).

In contrast, as examples of consumers with high marketplace legitimacy, consider lead users (Von Hippel 1986) and consumers who are members of brand communities in which marketers eagerly participate. Members of many of the brand communities studied by Schau et al. (2009), for example, are regarded by the mainstream as prized market segments whose needs and wants are considered appropriate and therefore translate into new commercial opportunities. The notion of consumers who are and are not legitimate can be related to prior discussions of consumer stigmatization (Adkins and Ozanne 2005; Henry and Caldwell 2006; Kozinets 2001), marketplace discrimination (Crockett, Grier, and Williams 2003), and immigrant consumers (Luedicke 2011). Work in these areas often focuses on consumers who are relatively powerless in their dealing with marketers and are lacking the necessary resources to fully participate in the markets that matter to them. To use the vocabulary of institutional theory, these consumers—who lack legitimacy, resources, and power—are marginal actors in the field.

What Consumers Want. A distinction can be drawn between cases where consumers want to be served by mainstream marketers in ways that can reconcile with extant

TABLE 2
SOURCES AND TYPES OF VARIATION IN MARKET CHANGE DYNAMICS

| What consumers want | How consumers are perceived in mainstream market | |
|---|--|---|
| | Consumers have less legitimacy in mainstream market | Consumers have greater legitimacy in mainstream market |
| To be better served by mainstream marketers | Consumers are <i>Stigmatized Seekers</i> <i>Example:</i> Fatshionistas who want to buy clothes from mainstream manufacturers and retailers <i>Anticipated dynamic:</i> If consumers are persistent in pursuing their change agenda, a few mainstream marketers will expand their offerings over time | Consumers are <i>Comfortable Collaborators</i> <i>Example:</i> Members of brand communities who collaborate with one another and with marketers to refine existing market offerings or design new ones <i>Anticipated dynamic:</i> Incremental changes to market offerings will be continuous as marketers collaborate with customers in an effort to keep them loyal |
| Fundamental changes to market practices | Consumers are <i>Resistant Rebels</i> <i>Example:</i> American protestors against genetically engineered food <i>Anticipated dynamic:</i> Marginal changes if any to institutionalized practices | Consumers are <i>Mainstream Malcontents</i> <i>Example:</i> Music consumers who want to download songs for free <i>Anticipated dynamic:</i> If changes threaten marketers' profitability, marketers will resist but find a compromise |

market logics versus cases where they want fundamental changes in practices that challenge pervasive market logics. In our study, Fatshionistas want changes that will result in more and better options for them, but they do not suggest that marketers eschew the logic of commerce. In this regard, Fatshionistas are not unlike members of brand communities who sometimes want offerings expanded and supported. These consumers are willing to pay for products they value.

By contrast, consumers sometimes want changes that challenge institutional logics, in particular the logic of commerce, which is present in most markets. For example, the music downloaders studied by Giesler (2008) challenged the industry's logic of commerce in that they resisted paying for music they consumed. As another example, consider the US-based activists studied by Kozinets and Handelman (2004), who objected to genetically engineered (GE) foods. They sought to challenge profitable industry production and sales practices, and they wanted changes to the market that would have profoundly altered either what or how GE food was produced and sold. Like the downloaders studied by Giesler (2008), the GE activists sought changes that were inconsistent with the dominant logic of commerce in the industry.

When we consider the two dimensions (how consumers are perceived in and what consumers want from the mainstream market) in conjunction, we can anticipate that each combination will produce different kinds of market change dynamics (table 2). Consider the case of *Stigmatized Seekers*, who lack legitimacy in mainstream markets yet want more or better offerings from them. In such cases, the pace of change in markets may be slow and uneven as institutionalized practices in the market and in the wider society have allowed marketers to ignore the aspiring segment. Although upstart marketers—who might be acting as institutional entrepreneurs—may try to meet these consumers' needs, the mainstream will be slower to do so and will find reasons to retreat from serving the segment even when tentative forays have been made. Without steady pressure from *Stigmatized Seekers*, through the use of strategies that appeal to institutional logics and the establishment of alliances with more powerful institutional actors, change might stall altogether.

In contrast, in markets where *Comfortable Collaborators* can count on mainstream marketers to be ever vigilant to their wants and needs, we can expect steady, if incremental, evolution in markets. In such contexts, corporations endeavor to keep consumers contented and to profit from that contentment by increasing sales within the segment. Consumers will have little need to be proactive agents of market change except in cases where they form attachments to offerings that marketers deem unprofitable (e.g., the Apple Newton case studied by Muñoz and Schau [2005]).

In contexts where consumers are *Mainstream Malcontents* who are legitimate in the mainstream market but who intensely dislike the practices of those marketers, we expect that those whose profitability is threatened by the desired market changes will resist the institutional reforms desired by

consumers. As part of this resistance, they may attempt to partially undermine the legitimacy of consumers, as was documented by Giesler (2008). Nonetheless, market changes, such as easier access to low-cost downloading, may be introduced by mainstream marketers who believe they rely on the patronage of certain consumer segments. Thus, in a context such as this, compromises between past practice by marketers and changes desired by consumers may be part of the unfolding market dynamic.

In contexts where consumers are *Resistant Rebels* who lack legitimacy in an institutionalized market setting and who seek fundamental changes to the market logic, we might expect very limited market change. Mainstream marketers may either ignore their critics, or they may make minimal gestures in acknowledgment of their concerns. In the case of anti-GE activists in North America, it seems that protests have promoted little change to the practice of mainstream marketers. It is interesting to contrast this with what unfolded in the United Kingdom when consumers objected to the introduction of GE foods. Unlike in the United States, mainstream consumers in the United Kingdom were mobilized to join in the rejection of GE foods (Krebs 2000). In our typology, this means that the UK context included *Mainstream Malcontents* and was not dominated by *Resistant Rebels* as in the United States. The outcomes in the two cases thus far have been quite different: food producers and retailers in the United Kingdom have found ways of doing business without relying primarily on GE foods. In general, we believe that unless *Resistant Rebels* can mobilize consumers regarded as legitimate by mainstream producers, or become legitimate themselves (as was the case for the consumers studied by Sandicki and Ger [2010], whose legitimacy increased as Islamic values became more resurgent in Turkey), then market dynamics will entail at most minor and/or temporary modifications to practices.

Our arguments here are of necessity speculative: a fully detailed account of market dynamics would require a series of longitudinal case studies. Yet, our typology is useful in that it provides theory-driven insight into contextual variation that matters for understanding differences in how markets evolve when consumers are dissatisfied with the status quo. Our literature is only beginning to accumulate studies of market change dynamics, and it is timely to consider how the contexts studied can be compared and contrasted. Although the typology we have developed here cannot account for all variation in market change dynamics, it does provide a starting point, grounded in institutional theory, upon which future research can build.

We particularly call for research in contexts where marketers themselves, as well as the consumers they serve, may lack legitimacy. While our typology highlights cases where consumers seek changes in highly institutionalized organizational fields, there are instances where both market offerings and the consumers who might want them lack mainstream legitimacy, such as the market for donated organs (Harris and Alcorn 2001). What mobilizes consumers to seek or support market changes when the markets that matter

to them are not (yet) legitimate? Our research provides a point of departure for inquiries such as this.

Consumer as Agents in Organizational fields

Our application of institutional theory has explored the implications of understanding consumers as actors who can affect organizational fields, drawing (as do marketers) on institutional logics and seeking (as do marketers) to gain legitimacy for practices that further their interests. This approach can be applied to a wider range of consumer research than that presented here. For example, institutional theory can be used to advance and systematically analyze the role of consumer agency and consumer collectives in market formation. Institutional theorists have attributed a central role to collective action in new field and market creation and have observed that these processes require investment from several types of interested actors, including consumers (Struben and Lee 2012). However, in most prior applications of institutional theory, consumers have been seen as interpreters of marketers' efforts to legitimate practices or products (Humphreys 2010a; Kates 2004). In recent work that has studied the roles of consumers in the emergence of the text messaging market (Ansari and Phillips 2011), they have been seen as nonstrategic and nonpurposeful actors whose unorganized micro-level practices may eventually lead to field-level change. In our work, a more agentic perspective on consumers as strategic, purposive actors in organizational fields has emerged. To be sure, this perspective is nuanced. We have highlighted consumers' dependence on more powerful institutional actors in their pursuit of change agendas. Furthermore, we have stressed that consumers, like others in the field, have embedded agency. Yet we have shown that when consumers are embedded in multiple organizational fields, as are Fatshionistas who are also part of the Fat Acceptance Movement, they can leverage logics from an adjacent field to justify their pursuit of change within a particular market. Advancing this perspective on consumer agency could further inform our understanding of how new and alternative markets emerge.

Our insights suggest that future research interested in change at the level of organizational fields will need to be particularly attentive to the role of consumers who are able to acquire a level of symbolic capital that distinguishes them from their peers. In our study, we focused on Fatshionista bloggers and highlighted their growing role in signaling to producers as well as other consumers the kinds of field-level changes that are desirable and possible. Subsequent studies that attempt to understand market change dynamics in other contexts will benefit from examining these differentiated (i.e., with higher symbolic capital) consumers in the light of institutional theory. For example, in the organizational field that includes restaurants, consumers who blog about restaurants and food trends and who attract a following among other consumers may well influence not only the fates of individual establishments but also trends in local markets. The conceptual insights developed here will be an

invaluable starting point to understand such fields and the role of consumers within them.

We believe that more research, situated in other kinds of institutional contexts and attentive to the multiple fields in which consumers are embedded, will be required to fully appreciate the range of roles that consumers can play in markets. Our context, like any, has limitations. First, we have studied a particular group of consumers, most of whom not only lack legitimacy in the market in question but are also stigmatized by society as a whole. We speculate that this contributes to the limited institutional response to the expressed wants and needs of Fatshionistas. Future research could usefully examine contexts where actors who are less culturally stigmatized try to influence particular organizational fields. For example, celiac patients and other health care consumers who want greater choices of appropriate goods that help them cope with their conditions might be such a contrasting case given that, although celiacs feel they are underserved, there is not a pervasive stigma associated with being a celiac sufferer.

Second, relative to some marginalized groups, Fatshionistas (or at least the leading bloggers we studied) have relatively higher cultural capital than the average consumer in the field in that they tend to be educated, skilled, and knowledgeable. The dynamics we identify here may be, therefore, less representative of those generated by other marginalized groups where actors are less endowed with such capital. This suggests that future research should look at the role of other forms of capital in consumer mobilization in addition to the symbolic capital highlighted in our study. An intersectionality approach (Gopaldas, forthcoming) could prove fruitful in investigating how class, cultural capital, and other social and demographic aspects intersect and influence consumer representativeness and engagement in change attempts in different fields. Finally, we studied the blogging activities that consumers engage in when attempting to change markets. Blogs consist essentially in textual data, but they are a particularly rich type of textual data that is active, relational, and dynamic (Kozinets 2010). Through their blog writing, plus-sized consumers manifest their opinion about marketplace practices, share narratives and experiences, divulge the images they craft to represent their fashion taste and know-how, and connect to each other, forming an online community bounded by their consumption need for fashionable clothes that fit. We were able to develop connections between the online universe of the Fatshionistas and their action in the market by analyzing their blogging activities. We did not, however, observe the full range of offline strategies Fatshionistas may adopt (e.g., writing letters to marketers, attending plus-size fashion shows, shopping in plus-size fashion outlets) in their attempts to be better served by mainstream marketers. Future studies can be developed that account for offline activities and complement our understanding of consumers' quest for change. We believe such research is important as our field still lacks a full understanding of when, why, and how consumers can change markets, and this phenomenon is of importance to the advancement of mar-

keting practice, marketing theory, and the well-being of consumers and of society as a whole.

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