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YouTube utopianism: Social media profanation and the clicktivism of capitalist critique[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Utopia is a complex and resilient concept. This article extends theory relating utopia to consumer culture and social media. After identifying two main schools of utopian consumer research, termed metopianism and w-topianism, the article inquires how social media discourses of utopianism challenge capitalism and what these challenges suggest about contemporary consumer activism. Sites of utopian discourse on YouTube concerning Walt Disney's original EPCOT plans, Jacque Fresco's Venus Project, and Elon Musk's Silicon Valley vision of the future are sources of netnographic data. The findings first focus on various discourses comparing political and economic systems, environmental effects, technology, and the reflexive, playful, imaginative, emotional, and engaged aspects of utopianist messages. Next, findings reveal worshipful attitudes towards the three charismatic utopian entrepreneurs and their visions. Utopian discourse on social media is clicktivism, but it is also an important and relevant social phenomenon that reveals the spectrum of forms of online political participation.

“Maybe it is not really possible, at least not in the foreseeable future (...) to undermine the global capitalist system because we cannot imagine any alternative to it.”

(Žižek, 1999, p. 352)

1. Introduction

Ever since its conceptual founding in 1516 by Sir Thomas More, an English Catholic lawyer, philosopher, martyr, and Saint, utopia has been a concept fraught with ambivalence and greeted with large doses of skepticism, and yet the concept has proven surprisingly resilient. What has utopia become in the last half century, exactly? Three things at least. First, utopian describes a form of literature (Sargent, 1975) that is often linked to science fiction and political writing (Williams, 1978). Second, utopia is a conception of “systemic otherness”, the imagining of “an alternate society” (Jameson, 2005, p. 36), and the “expression of the desire for a better way of being” (Levitas, 2007, p. 290). Third, utopianism is linked to political beliefs and social movements through a “principle of hope” underpinning the human impulse to long for and

imagine a better world (Bloch, 1986; Sargent, 1975). True to its ambivalent origins, however, utopias are conventionally discussed derogatively as wishful, manipulative, “impractical”, “ideological” ideas, notions that may even be “dangerous and incipiently totalitarian” (Levitas, 2007, p. 297). In the realm of politics, utopias are frequently linked with the Left, socialism, communism, and totalitarianism. The “terminology of both ideology and utopia is frequently used to delegitimize the position of political opponents” (Levitas, 2007).

In our current era, consumption and utopia have been interrelated in theories considering the overlap between economic, social, and political spheres. According to one school of thought, the lofty urges for social betterment of utopianism have been discharged into a desire for consumption, enacted as “‘commodity activism’ in the neoliberal moment” (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 1). Some scholars believe that utopian thinking is declining as the wonders of expanding global capitalism and free market governance come to provide the only possible guide for future social progress. It may well be that, as González (2009, p. 36) asserts, “the waning of the Utopian ideal is a fundamental historical and political symptom” of our times.

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Other scholars find that consumer utopias are a ubiquitous part of capitalism today. For example, Murtola (2010, p. 38) sardonically notes that “utopia is a perfect ally for capitalism”. Because of markets’ and consumers’ neophilia, capitalist firms “evoke utopia in their efforts to maximize profits” because “utopia is the perfect commodity” (Murtola, 2010). In this view, utopia is not waning, but an inseparable feature of a consumer culture in which consumption itself is the sine qua non of contemporary morality. Nestled into various individualized consumer utopias, morality shifts to become an ephemeral promise of the ever-new and always improving. Under such conditions, “marketing more than any other contemporary cultural institution” assumes the mantle of ‘keeper of the utopian flame’ (Brown, Maclaran, & Stevens, 1996, p. 676).

Marketing, consumer, and business researchers have investigated a variety of utopias (alongside their Foucauldian variants, heterotopias). Utopian elements have been identified in shopping malls (Maclaran & Brown, 2005; Murtola, 2010), on cruise lines (Kolberg, 2016) and social media (Kozinets, Belz, & McDonagh, 2011), and within fan communities (Jenkins, 1992; Kozinets, 2001), emancipatory projects (Hong & Vicdan, 2016; Kozinets, 2002), and activist communities and politics (Bossy, 2014; Chatzidakis, Maclaran, & Bradshaw, 2012; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). Yet ambiguity and paradox pervade this body of literature. For example, Chatzidakis et al. (2012) sets very restrictive terms, asserting that established notions of community as spatial proximity and deliberate resistance are necessary for us to take serious considerations of utopian gathering. Similarly, Bossy (2014), and Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012) find consumer utopia relegated to “political consumerism” and “commodity activism”. On the other hand, Brown et al. (1996, p. 676) assert that utopias now inhabit copious and mundane “archetypal marketing utopias”. To develop a more systematized understanding of contemporary consumer utopias, this article first delves deeper into theories regarding the conflicted nature of utopia in contemporary consumer culture. Then, it describes the method and sites that ground its empirical investigation. It presents findings next and discusses their implications. The article concludes by developing our understanding of the participation of consumers in collective projects of utopianism.

2. Utopian consumer theory

2.1. Two schools of consumer utopia theory

Business researchers, usually those with a critical perspective, have frequently been interested in the topic of utopia. In marketing and consumer research, studies of utopianism are a small but nonetheless important and ongoing body of literature. Theorizations of consumer utopianism fall into two main schools, which I summarize with two portmanteaus, “metopia” and “wetopia”. I use the term “metopia” (me-oriented + utopia) to refer to a conception of consumers’ views of world betterment as embedded in the institutions of marketing and consumption and their focus on continuous innovation of practices, goods, and services, leading to a personal experience of ever-improving standards of living. Metopias are individualized, neoliberal, private, and explicitly consumerist conceptions. They relate notions of betterment mainly or solely to improvements in personal lifestyle and consumption level. I term the counter-position a “wetopia” (we-oriented + utopia).

A wetopia is a conception of consumers’ views of world betterment as based on improvements in information, choices, purchase, and other consumption-related elements. Wetopias extend a consumerist orientation to political, economic, and social spheres. Concerned with notions such as consumer activism, work in this school relates consumers’ utopianism to solutions that might challenge and seek to improve current marketing or consumption practices. Thus, work in both the metopian and wetopian veins tends to support and even develop the presiding capitalist institutions that govern contemporary marketing

and consumption. In the following sections, I briefly explore these two different school of thought.

2.1.1. The metopian school

In one of the earliest studies of consumer utopianisms, Brown et al. (1996, p. 676) conclude that the “grandiose” ideological visions of social betterment of earlier “Utopian prophets” have been replaced by a profusion of “archetypal marketing utopias” consisting of pragmatic consumer conveniences such as “shiny hair”, “clean clothing”, and “instant credit”. These are metopias: individualistically focused, smaller scale, lower-key, everyday imaginings of personal betterment involving choices transpiring within the existing marketing system without concern for radically changing it. Extending their earlier work, and concluding (again) “that marketing itself is deeply utopian”, Maclaran and Brown, (2001, p. 385) find “the utopian impulse” inscribed into many of “the practices of everyday life”, citing examples such as retail shopping experiences, and the consumption of “themed shops”, “computer games” and “lifestyle magazines”. Later still, Maclaran and Brown (2005, p. 320) empirically confirm their earlier “marketing utopia” assertions, locating utopia in an Irish shopping mall, and shopping malls in general, and concluding (once again) that “the old idea of utopianism as a grand social vision... is giving way to the notion that utopia is manifold, small scale, and inscribed in countless everyday practices and cultural forms”. Providing an example of one of those countless forms and practices, Kolberg (2016, p. 6) finds utopian themes in branded travel experiences, arguing that the Carnival cruise line’s “narrative of inclusion” satisfies consumers’ “utopian impulse”.

Offering a more surprising example, Hong and Vicdan (2016, pp. 120, 135) find metopian themes in ecovillages, concluding by rejecting “the misconception of ecovillages as utopian spaces”, and arguing instead that, rather than seeing them as sites of activism or resistance, these locations should be viewed as alternative choices within, and even complements to, dominant consumption lifestyles. Their finding resonates with Kozinets’ (2002, p. 36) conclusion that Burning Man can be considered a “youtopia”, a type of utopian “conceptual space” that is “personally enriching” rather than “a grand Utopia”. In an important conclusion, Maclaran and Brown (2005, p. 321) suggest that consumers’ interactions with contemporary markets’ “plethora of utopian alternatives” may be limited to simply choosing among them, rather than critiquing or contributing to them, a clear signal of the metopian perspective’s neoliberal foundations.

2.1.2. The wetopian school

Unlike the metopian school, the wetopian view of utopianism consumer research is concerned about problems with the current system of marketing and consumption. Wetopian scholarship includes consumer ethnographies of allegedly utopian collectives. Jenkins (1988, 1992, p. 280) and Kozinets (2001) find that media fandom in general, and *Star Trek*’s variant of technologically utopian fandom in particular, gives consumers “a space that allows them to discover ‘what utopia feels like’” and a comfortable position within the contemporary marketplace from which to embody utopian aims through the pursuit of, for example, non-profit volunteer work and community outreach. In another ethnography, this one of Exarcheia, an Athenian neighborhood, Chatzidakis et al. (2012) draw conceptual connections between the resistant utopian ideals of residents and the importance of public spaces. Finally, in a comparative case study of slow food movement groups, a “de-growth” organization, and an ecovillage, Bossy (2014) a conceptually connects the utopianism of these organizations to the “political consumerism” of consumer activists and morally concerned consumers. For Bossy (2014, p. 193–4), utopian discourse is “essential for activists” in order to recruit members of the general public, reinforce collective identities, and strengthen bonds within activist organizations. Wetopian scholarship focuses on better social, political, and/or market systems that have the potential to improve human existence by working within, rather than opposing or altering, the

contemporary neoliberal capitalist system.

2.1.3. Considering the schools

The grand tradition of utopianism holds, in essence, that people try to imagine “sociopolitical institutions, norms and individual relationships” (Sargent, 1975, p. 140–1) that follow “a more perfect principle” than those experienced subjectively by the imaginer (Suvin, 1973, p. 62). It is worth remembering that most utopian scholarship is found in the humanities, in literary, visual, and cultural studies—rather than in the social sciences, business, or marketing research. In fact, several marketing articles that examine utopia build upon this humanities-based utopian literature, hermeneutically applying it to questions that consider the improvement of today’s capitalist marketplaces and consumer culture. In this vein, Schroeder (2000) examines Bellamy’s (1888) influential utopian novel, *Looking Backward*, contrasting it with the contemporary world in order to reveal some of the lasting inequities and disparities of capitalist markets and consumer culture. Similarly, Burgos-Mascarell, Ribeiro-Soriano, and Martínez-López (2016, p. 1845) utilize a close reading of Roth’s (2011), dystopian novel *Divergent* to explore ways to ‘prevent the failure of utopia’. These studies are perhaps closest to the long-standing traditions of Utopian research, and could be said to constitute a third school, which is of interest but which I will not focus upon further because it is not based upon empirical research.

In empirical studies, metopian scholars focus on the everyday, finding the energy of utopianism siphoned into consumers’ everyday quests, promoting a generally self-focused and socially unreflective consumption of services and goods such as tourism (Kolberg, 2016), shopping experiences (Maclaran & Brown, 2005), and cosmetics (Brown et al., 1996). For the wetopian school, however, the broader social goals of utopianism are present in a marketplace full of product and brand choice, one of “‘commodity activism’ in the neoliberal moment” (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 1). In this situation, “corporate power and antibrand activism are countervailing forces in a dynamic system of shifting and perpetually morphing relationships between power and resistance” as brand managers within “marketing savvy corporations” endlessly “adapt and find ways to turn critique into a profit-making opportunities, doling out products analogous to organic Twinkies” (Thompson, 2004, p. 174). Although utopianism is pursued through activism in movements or communities such as Exarcheia (Chatzidakis et al., 2012), ecovillages and slow food (Bossy, 2014), and Star Trek fandom (Jenkins, 1988), this utopianism rarely, if ever, questions the hidden institutional superstructures that create and sustain such consumer culture phenomena. We currently know very little about the conceptual places or discursive practices where utopianist frameworks might lead to questions about the consumerist practices of a more general public or their dependence on capitalist institutions. Therefore, our knowledge of contemporary consumer and capitalist activism would be enhanced by a study of these public utopian discourses, beginning with a broader understanding of how they relate to relevant scholarship on utopianism.

2.2. Utopian studies and beyond

2.2.1. Profanation of utopia

Utopian Studies is an established interdisciplinary scholarly field with its own journals and conferences that considers and develops theories of utopia and utopianism. According to recent utopian scholarship by one of its most prominent contemporary figures, Ruth Levitas, utopia is not an abstract concept, but becomes, in utopianism, a method: a way for people to begin thinking about social change and perhaps for them to become inspired and organized into pursuing an improved living state in the present (Levitas, 2013). However helpful this might sound, we are left with the most important question unanswered: exactly how does this inspiration and organization occur?

In her study of the shoppers in “Harmonia”, a nontraditional Finnish

shopping mall, Murtola (2010) compares the average consumer to Homer and Tennyson’s drugged, blissful, oblivious, and melancholic lotus eaters. “Today, this land, where people are immersed in a melancholic slumber, is the land of the commodity, of the shopping mall” (Murtola, 2010, 47). The mall, like consumer capitalism itself, is the “utopia of forgetfulness toward the rest of the world”, a place and state of mind of temporary satisfactions both “addictive” and careless of humanity and the future (Murtola, 2010). “As long as there are commodities to choose from, there is no need to focus on what lies beyond the immediate present. Today, we can buy our illusions of utopia” (Murtola, 2010). Identical to both to the Irish shopping mall in Maclaran and Brown (2005) and the metopias of Brown et al. (1996), this is a conception of utopia “domesticated and reduced to a choice between specific given alternatives”...utopia “enclosed and packaged”... utopia “on a leash” held by its capitalist overlords (Murtola, 2010, 46). Murtola (2010) then poses the question: how might consumers be made to awaken from their comfortable metopian slumber? How might they be drawn to focus beyond the present moment, beyond the shopping mall, beyond capitalism itself? The answer she proposes is through a process of “profanation”, whereby consumers play with utopianism, transforming the challenging solidity of the institution of capitalism through the revolutionary potential of public engagement (Murtola, 2010).

2.2.2. Capitalism-as-religion

Murtola develops Agamben’s (2007) notion of “profanation” as a way to utopianism into consumers’ practical reality. Based on an almost-forgotten fragment of Benjamin’s (1999) writing, “capitalism-as-religion” (Löwy, 2009) is a theory that capitalism is more than an economic or social system, but instead must be understood as a “religion” that “does not aim at the transformation of the world, but its destruction” (Agamben, 2007, p. 28), or depletion by capitalist consumers. According to Agamben (2007), the capitalist religion makes genuine satisfaction impossible, because everything becomes an image of satisfaction: an unrealizable, constantly evolving usage, where something else is always better and desires can only be satisfied in the past or in the future. Agamben’s adaptive ideas draw upon and acknowledge Baudrillard’s (1994, 2016) notions of “the system of objects” and “simulacra” as well as Debord’s (2012) ideas of the “society of the spectacle”. They link these ideas to Benjamin’s (1999) ideas of capitalism-as-religion as they propose a way to imagine alternatives to capitalism. All religions remove “things, places, animals, or people from common use and transfer them to a separate sphere” (Agamben & Fort, 2007, p. 23), such as one where capitalism’s immense waste, destruction, species extinctions, and inequality can be considered beyond question, and in this sense, capitalism itself remains sacrosanct. Considered as a process, then, profanation reconnects the abstract and unquestionable institution of capitalism to its manifestations in daily life through peer-generated conversations about actual people, places, companies, the physical world, and so on. Flattening capitalism’s abstract power, profanation removes its distanced, sacred qualities. The playful openness of utopianism thus opens a profanating space for the consideration of alternatives to capitalism.

2.2.3. The role of play in profanation

For Murtola (2010) and Agamben (2007), play is the key to this passage from unusable utopia to popular utopianism and from the repression of utopianism to its secularization and freedom. Play “frees and distracts humanity from the sphere of the sacred” (Agamben & Fort, 2007, p. 25). Agamben and Fort (2007, p. 31) discuss the presence of ‘natural’ profanations which occur in nature and are related to play with the example of a cat “playing with a ball of yarn as if it were a mouse”. In play, the cat uses behaviors characteristic of predatory behaviors, but does so in a way that frees the predatory, hunting behavior “from its genetic inscription” (Agamben and Fort, 2007). The behavior still looks like hunting, and might even help with hunting, but it has

been emancipated from an “obligatory relationship to an end” and therefore releases the behavior, freeing it for a new use (Agamben and Fort, 2007). Playing with a ball of yarn liberates the mouse from being prey and the cat from predatory behaviors that capture and kill mice. Murtola (2010) uses Agamben's ideas of play to postulate a process that potentially liberates contemporary consumers from their fixity on the all-consuming pleasures of capitalist utopias. Under a profanated utopianism, capitalism can be “wrested out of its sacred position” and returned to a “dialectical position” where everyday consumers can conceptually play with it (Murtola, 2010, 51). Profanation of consumer utopia thus involves a type of dialectic and discursive movement between utopianism (as a concept which can and does question major institutions such as consumerist capitalism), and its manifestations in the capitalist consumer utopias of wetopia (which questions extant forms of consumption and marketing, but not capitalism) and metopia (which does not question any of these things). An empirical investigation of profanation requires us to chart the interstitial region between contemporary utopianism, wetopias, metopias, and the ways that consumers transgressively play with them and challenge their supporting institutions. To do this, we need to locate an actual communication medium in which to locate this proposed interstitial region.

2.3. Democratizing utopia's potential

2.3.1. Utopia in the public sphere

In foundational work, Rheingold (1993, p. 236) expressed that, like many of the early online community writers and thinkers, he believed that the emergent social media “technology, if properly understood and defended by enough citizens, does have democratizing potential in the way that alphabets and printing presses had democratizing potential”. As has been oft-repeated, this democratizing potential of technology associates social media with Habermas' (1991) conception of a “political public sphere” in which communicative acts denote a “discursive formation of opinion and will on the part of a public”. Habermas (1991) offers his conception as a “discourse-centered concept of democracy” in which “the spontaneous flow of communication unsubverted by power” takes place “within a public sphere that is not geared toward decision making but toward discovery and problem resolution and that in this sense is nonorganized” (p. 451). Captured in this way, the connection between Habermas' democratized communicative sphere, Agamben and Murtola's profanation of utopia, and the contemporary phenomenon of social media is apparent.

In recent times, social media has been associated with a raft of social ills, such as fostering individual communication filter bubbles, spreading fake news, encouraging invidious comparison, cyberbullying, and allowing foreign adversaries to influence democratic elections. These problems are not new. A decade before Cambridge Analytica began collecting private data on Facebook, Atton (2004) warned us that we cannot simply “consider the internet as an unproblematic force for social change” for to do this is “to ignore the political and economic determinants that shape the technology; it is to pay little attention to how technological ‘advances’ may be shaped or determined by particular social and cultural elites (corporations, governments)” (p. 24). In fact, no less an authority than Habermas himself was ambivalent about the Internet's potential to foster participatory public political communication. He believed that the “publics produced by the Internet remain closed off from one another like global villages” and may not be able to “span systematically differentiated contexts” (Habermas, 1998, p. 120–1).

Social media theory draws our attention to structural political and economic impediments to genuinely open and critical public discourse as well as towards the role of social and cultural elites such as technology corporations and government agencies and regulators (Fenton, 2008; Hardt & Negri, 2004; Mouffe, 2005). It also questions the nature of public social media exchange itself, seeing the weight of the heterogeneous “multitude” (Hardt & Negri, 2004) as a type of indomitable

force that fragments all unifying discourse. Furthermore, a number of scholars have critiqued the linkage of online action and activism. Using the shorthand term “clicktivism”, Shulman (2009) argues that mass email social change campaigns are a lower quality and less effective form of social mobilization, a critique that has been subsequently applied to many types of low-involvement and low-commitment social media acts of political participation. The extent to which social media use might be a form of activism that could allow a nascent utopianism to bloom into institutional change thus remains an open question. We should wisely maintain an open-minded analytic focus on the potential as well as the peril of social media communication and clicktivism as we consider profanation and utopian discourse.

2.3.2. Power and counter-power

Communication and social media activism researcher Castells (2007, p. 239) conceives of power as “the structural capacity of a social actor to impose its will over other social actors(s)”. Relatedly, then, profanation could conceivably result in the ability of the social media consumer to exercise “counter-power”, which is “the capacity of a social actor to resist and challenge power relations that are institutionalized” (Castells, 2007). In Castells' conception, power and counter-power today operate from within a new technological framework, one in which the institutions of media politics, industrial marketing media, consumer culture, and new self-directed and social forms of communication such as social media interact (Castells, 2004).

Regarding social media activism, Castells (2007) asserts that the challenge for contemporary social movements, which are more flow-like than place bound, is for them “not to virtualize themselves to death” (p. 239). By this, Castells (2007) may be suggesting that the abstract quality of clicktivism on social media can distract from concrete action in the social sphere. The challenge for social media activists is to stay focused on “their ultimate goal: the restoration of meaning in the new space/time of our existence, made of both flows, places and their interaction. That is building networks of meaning in opposition to networks of instrumentality” (Castells, 2007). The communicative technologies of mobile social media offer “an extraordinary medium for social movements and rebellious individuals to build their autonomy and confront the institutions of society in their own terms and around their own projects”, Castells (2007, p. 249) asserts. Consumers using social media to confront institutions such as capitalism on their own terms and through projects of their own making will enact the newest stage of an established conflict between embedded institutional powers and consumers, according to Castells: ‘the struggle to free consumers' minds’ (Castells, 2007, 259). Having presented, defined, and discussed the key theoretical concepts of this article in the preceding sections, I now summarize them in Table 1 before moving on to the research questions that combine them.

2.4. Research questions

This research investigation is focused by concepts of utopianism, metopia, wetopia, profanation, counter-power, and clicktivism. It is informed by empirical scholarship suggesting that consumers are influenced by a cultic devotion to capitalism-as-religion (Murtola, 2010, p. 47) and content to choose among metopia's profusion of everyday “low key” utopias (Brown et al., 1996, p. 676), or, at least, are largely unable to see beyond the options of market “commodity activism” (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). Providing the final theoretical component to the investigation, the counter-power of social media (Castells, 2007) may combine with utopianism to act as a profanating counterbalance to the institution of capitalism. On the other hand, online utopianist discourses may simply be low-commitment political affectations, another manifestation of the clicktivism of a disenfranchised world.

We still know very little about how consumers use social media for utopian discursive projects that challenge dominant institutions such as

Table 1
Key theoretical concepts.

Core theoretical concept	Conceptual source	Definition
Utopianism	Sargent (1975), Suvin (1973), Williams (1978)	The attempt to create significantly better societies by first challenging dominant social institutions, such as capitalism, socialism, contemporary politics, or communism.
Metopianism	Current article (original)	A self-oriented view of consumer utopia; a conception of consumers' views of world betterment as embedded in marketing and consumption-based improvements in practices, goods, and services, leading to a personal experience of ever-improving standards of living.
Wetopianism	Current article (original)	A collectively oriented formulation of consumer utopia; a conception of consumers' views of world betterment as based on a questioning of, and challenge to, extant and embedded industrial systems of marketing and consumption that might hide social inequities and ecological consequences.
Profanation	Agamben (2007), Murtola (2010)	Movement of ideas of consumer utopia from lofty, sacred, and unusable conceptual spheres to public and usable domains of influence; in this article, conceptual movements between wetopia and metopia.
Play	Agamben (2007), Baudrillard (1994), Debord (2012)	A creative process that liberates consumers from inaction; the key to profanation; spontaneous activity emancipated from obligatory relations to objectives.
Counter-power	Castells (2004, 2007)	The capacity of social actors to resist and challenge institutionalized power relations; theorized to operate in a new institutional framework in which media politics, marketing media, consumer culture, and new communications technologies interrelate.
Clicktivism	Shulman (2009), Rotman et al. (2011), Halupka (2014)	The low effort and ineffective practice of supporting a political or social cause via the Internet by means such as social media or online petitions.
Political public sphere	Habermas (1991), Rheingold (1993)	A discursive formation of public opinion in which a spontaneous flow of communication occurs within a public sphere, geared towards discovery and problem resolution; a notion often associated with social media's positive potentialities.
Capitalism-as-religion	Agamben (2007), Baudrillard (2016), Benjamin (1999), Debord (2012), Löwy (2009)	A theory that capitalism is more than an economic or social system, but instead must be understood as a cultic religion without mercy or truce; the capitalist religion makes the achievement of genuine satisfaction impossible, because something else is always better and desires can never be satisfied in the present moment.

capitalism and reveal the connections between metopias, wetopias, and whatever conceptual terrain lies between them. To inform our current understanding, this investigation considers a series of interrelated research questions that interrogate the contents of contemporary social media communications for insights into consumer utopianism and its potential for activism. How do social media discourses of utopianism challenge the institution of capitalism itself? What contours do these challenges assume? Is there evidence of profanation, especially its theorized playful aspects? What about counter-power? What type of activism or clicktivism might these discourses represent? What are its implications for developing our understanding of both utopianism and consumer activism? In the next section, we turn to a description of the methods employed to investigate these questions.

3. Method

3.1. Netnographic procedures

To investigate its research questions about the use of social media for popular utopianist discourse, this article deploys “netnography”—a particular kind of online ethnography whose use is commonplace in marketing, consumer research, tourism, and many other kinds of academic business and communication research fields (Kozinets, 2015). A netnography is “a specific set of related data collection, analysis, ethical and representation research practices” guiding the use of social media for participant-observational studies (Kozinets, 2015, p. 79). As Kozinets and Nocker (2018, p. 131) describe it, “netnography’s purpose lies in asserting the pre-eminence of meaning making and its understanding, providing a cultural approach to studying the social interaction transpiring through interactive communications media”.

3.2. YouTube datasites

3.2.1. Engagement operations

The netnography in this article resulted from a 10-month long online engagement with three YouTube-based datasites. The investigation began with an adaptation of a keynote speech that included Walt Disney’s capitalist utopian plan to build a permanent, corporately-sponsored futuristic community, originally called Project X (Marling,

1997; Ndalianias, 2017). Project X later developed into the Experimental Prototype Community (or City) of Tomorrow and was abbreviated as “EPCOT”. Disney originally visualized EPCOT as a small city of about 20,000 inhabitants who would live and work in a “laboratory city” filled with the latest consumer innovations from “new science and technology” (Ndalianias, 2017, p. 159). He viewed this utopian city as a way to “showcase to the world the ingenuity and imagination of American free enterprise” (Ndalianias, 2017) and also to allow American corporate executives to intrusively surveil the city’s populace as an ongoing marketing research experiment.

3.2.2. Datasite 1: Rob Plays’ ‘Would EPCOT Have Worked?’

After exploring several datasites relating to EPCOT and utopia on Reddit, Pinterest, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and several discussion forums, I decided to focus on YouTube. YouTube is the most popular social media site in the United States, with 73% of adults saying they use it (Smith & Anderson, 2018). YouTube is also the second largest search engine, and third most visited website, in the world. These characteristics of mass appeal and wide access fit well with the public sphere focus of the research question.

Disney’s utopian ideas are intelligently and professionally questioned in a 9:25 video entitled “Would EPCOT Have Worked?” (abbreviated here at WEHW?). The video was first published on YouTube in May 2017, and it is the work of Mr. Rob Plays, who created, wrote, and narrated a number of Disney and Disney theme park related videos on his YouTube channel. WEHW? Had over 580,000 views, 8400 likes, and 877 comments at the time the netnographic research began (please see Table 1 for additional details on the site). The data site surrounding the video is pictured in Fig. 1, which captures Walt Disney standing in front of a map of the original planned EPCOT urban development.

I viewed the video several times. It offered a journalistic look at Walt’s original ideas for EPCOT, combining contemporary visuals and archival footage. The narrator critiques the viability of the EPCOT plan, in particular its need for constant updating. Comments on the video were relevant, active, interactive, substantial, diverse, and rich, thus meeting netnographic selection operations decision criteria. After downloading the comments and replies in their entirety, then reading and engaging with the communications posted on the site for several months, along with keeping an immersion journal and performing

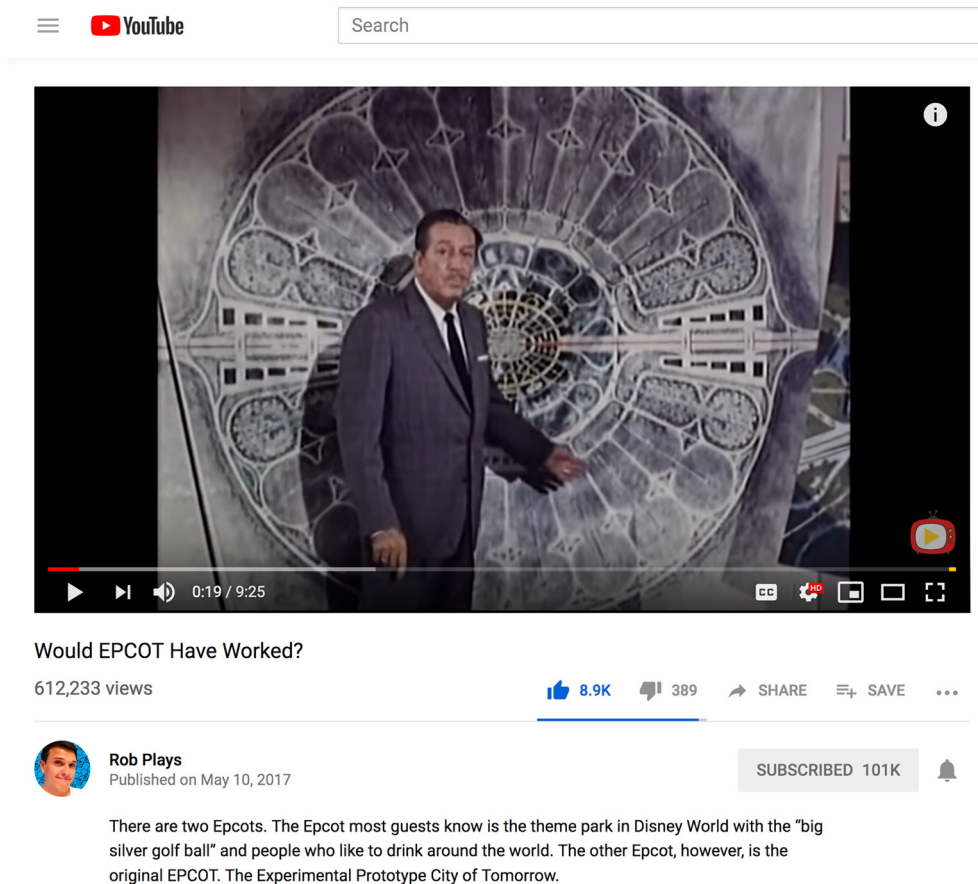


Fig. 1. Screenshot of Rob Plays' "Would Epcot Have Worked" (WEHW?) YouTube Video Datasite.

investigative data collection operations, I began applying interpretive procedures common to cultural treatments of qualitative data.

3.2.3. Datasite 2: *The Venus Project's 'The Choice is Ours'*

Based upon an analysis of the WEHW? video, as well as several discussions with a community of like-minded scholars, it was apparent that additional field sites would nuance the investigation beyond this single context. I wanted to maintain the focus on capitalist utopias. But I also wanted to find some variance in those utopias and their utopianisms. My analysis coded and counted the different comparisons in the comments and replies. The most common EPCOT comparison was to something called The Venus Project.

The Venus Project is an organization that promotes and seeks to realize the late American architect Jacques Fresco's utopian vision of a technological, AI-based, and ecologically sustainable future city. He based his future utopian vision on what he calls a "resource-based economy"—an idea he had been promoting in various forms since the 1950s. His view was capitalist, and he positioned his urban utopia in current capitalist economies. But it was based on large-scale collective investment in productive resources to manage the basic needs of all community members.

I wanted to maintain the use of YouTube video discussions in order to be able to compare the profanation of their social media utopian discourses. After investigating various YouTube sites related to TVP, I located "The Choice is Ours" (abbreviated as "TCiO"). Fig. 2 presents a screenshot of the YouTube video showing Fresco being interviewed. TCiO is a professionally produced, full length (1:37:19) video about Fresco and his utopian ideas. Posted in January 2016, this is the most popular TVP video and possessed over 27,000 likes and 5000 comments at time of writing (for details, please see Table 1). The subtitled transcription of the video was offered in 26 different languages and a

significant minority of the comments were also in languages other than English (which were translated into English using Google Translate for analysis). The TCiO video proved to be a fertile area for data collection and participant-observation that met all six of the specified netnographic criteria from Kozinets (2015, p. 168–169) and became the second field site.

3.2.4. Datasite 3: *TED talks' 'The Future We're Building—and Boring'*

The coding also revealed that the most commonly named individual invoked on the Rob Plays EPCOT video was Elon Musk. Musk's presence offered an interesting difference from the other two sites, but was also clearly based in a vision of capitalist utopia. Musk, a household name, is widely held to be a visionary and utopian entrepreneur. At the age of 28, he sold his first company for \$340 million. He then founded a company which merged to become *PayPal*, a company that revolutionized online payments and was sold for \$1.5 billion. He followed up at the age of 31 by founding *SpaceX*, an aerospace manufacturer and space transport services company. *Tesla*, an electric vehicle and solar panel manufacturer followed in 2003. Other futuristic ventures came afterward, including *The Boring Company*, an infrastructure and tunnel-construction company. After examining several possible YouTube videos about Musk, I chose the most relevant and popular one, a TED talk interview with the famous entrepreneur that was posted in May 2017.

Depicted in Fig. 3, which shows a seated Elon Musk answering a question, "The Future We're Building—and Boring" (abbreviated to "TFWB&B") is a 40:50 long video featuring an interview with Musk conducted by author and WIRED magazine editor Chris Anderson on a stage in front of a live audience. TFWB&B features Musk detailing his technological utopian capitalist ideas, in particular focusing on his most recent company, *The Boring Company*, and his proposed "Hyperloop" high-speed transportation system. At the time of data collection, the

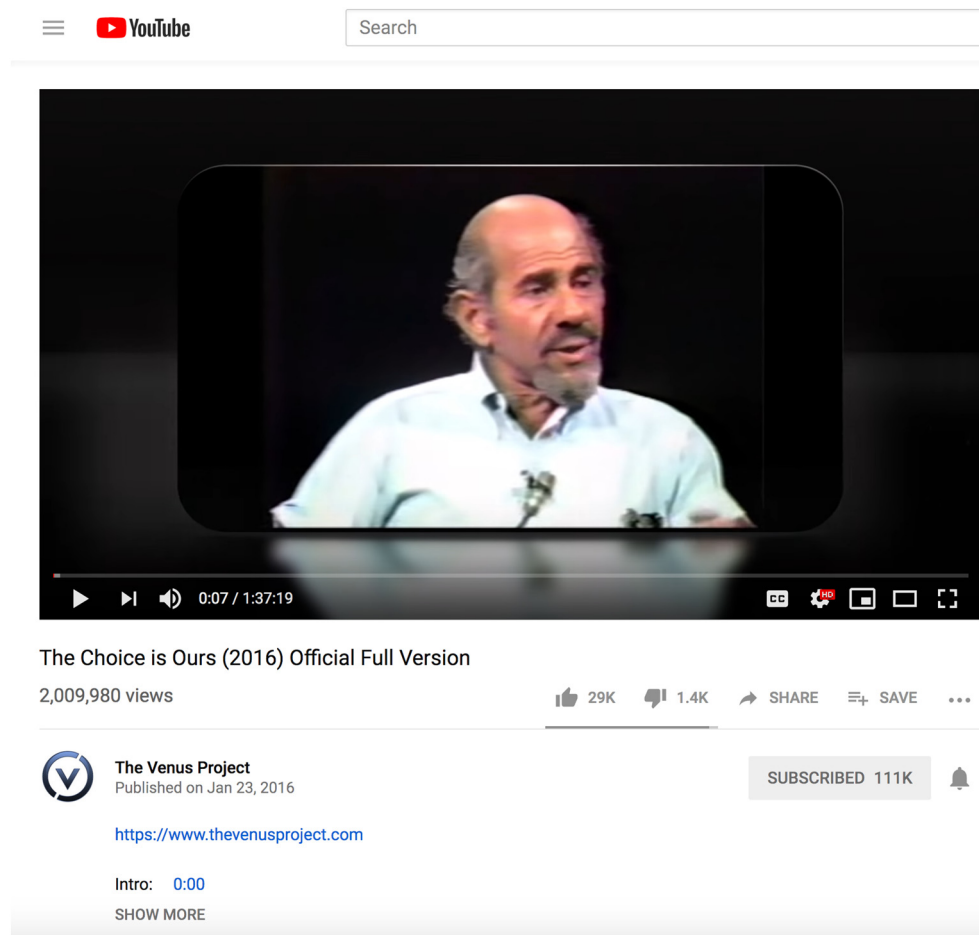


Fig. 2. Screenshot of "The Choice is Ours" (TCiO) YouTube Video Datasite.

video had amassed over 107,000 likes and 8600 comments (for additional details, please see Table 2).

3.2.5. Data collection and analysis procedures

At the initial stage of investigating each YouTube site, the entire contents of the comments from the three YouTube videos were downloaded to three separate Excel spreadsheets. The cultural decoding process began with a series of hermeneutic readings of the entire set of YouTube video comments and replies. At just under 488,000 words, this was an achievable task, but took some time and devotion. For comparison, Tolkien's entire *Lord of the Rings* trilogy has about 454,000 words, and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* has over 587,000 words. The dataset was read in toto twice, highlighted, annotated, coded, searched, scanned, summarized, and synthesized.

Using the "data condensation" processes described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2013), the large corpus of data in the three datasets were gradually 'selected, simplified, abstracted, and transformed' (p. 12) by searches and choices to focus on theoretically-relevant social media traces such as the combination and recombination of capitalism, religion, consumption, and utopia. The analysis paid specific attention to any mentions of capitalism and socialism as well as matters activist, political, and critical in tone. Engaged data collection operations and datasite visitation during the 10-month long netnography entailed: (1) consistent engagement with the dataset of YouTube comments and replies in downloaded format, (2) regular visits to the three sites to recontextualize particular verbatim from the dataset and add nuance to the analysis, and (3) the maintenance of an immersion journal that recorded these netnographic operations and captured/developed reflexive impressions. Overall, the analysis and interpretation

integrated iterative deductive and inductive practices to reach the research conclusions without automated content coding or the application of machine learning algorithms.

3.3. Research ethics

3.3.1. Online ethnography and netnography guidelines followed

This investigation followed the most up-to-date ethical procedures recommended for netnography and online ethnography (Government of Canada Panel on Research Ethics, 2018; Kozinets, 2015; Markham et al., 2012). This specific research poses no more than minimal risk to participants, who are pseudonymously posting conversational matter, with some political and social content, to a popular public forum. These activities, although often partisan, are becoming so commonplace that it would be misleading to characterize them as sensitive topics.

3.3.2. The lack of risk and presence of potential benefit to business and social understanding

After obtaining Institutional Review Board exemption from my university, my data collection proceeded. Researcher disclosure did not occur because I did not post comments to the YouTube videos and there were no direct interactions with comment posters. Informed consent was unnecessary because the videos, comments, and replies have been voluntarily posted on a well-known public forum. In addition, the comments and replies are not searchable using conventional search engines (data scraping and mining tools, or lengthy manual processes are required merely to view comments beyond the initial landing page). Understanding the use of social media for social betterment is in the public interest and could inform wiser perspectives and decisions about

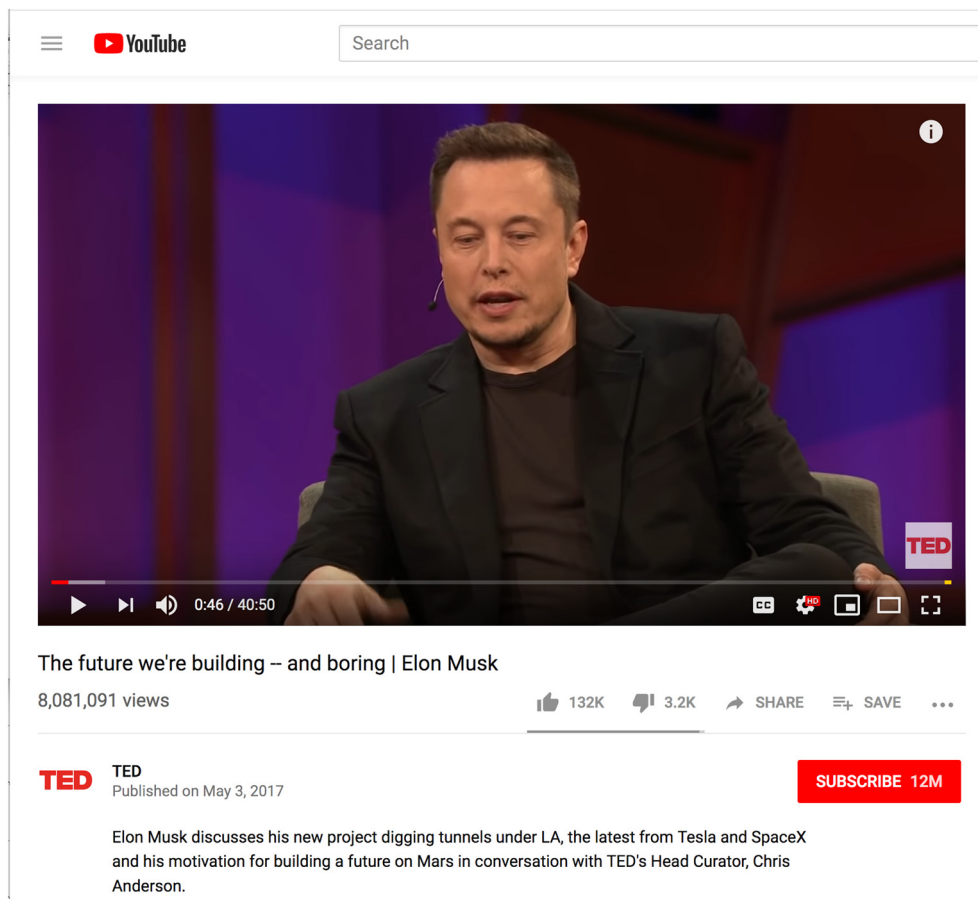


Fig. 3. Screenshot of "The Future We're Building—and Boring" (TFWB&B) YouTube Video Datasite.

this ubiquitous yet increasingly controversial medium.

3.3.3. The use of pseudonyms

For confidentiality, I assigned pseudonyms to all comment posts and replies. Where possible, I attempted to create pseudonyms similar in spirit to comment posters' original pseudonyms. Also, I maintained the content of the message—as well as accurately reporting its actual online location and subsequent interactions—while correcting grammar and spelling where needed for enhanced readability and coherence. Throughout, I have attempted to portray participants' contributions with dignity and respect, and to treat their public contributions to discourse both critically and with professionalism. The article now turns to the presentation of the analyzed data.

4. Findings

4.1. Overview of findings

This investigation seeks to inform our understanding about how consumers use social media for utopian discursive projects that challenge dominant institutions such as capitalism and reveal the connections between metopias, wetopias, and forms of consumer activism. The first group of findings will focus on various discourses that compare political and economic systems, their leadership, their environmental effects, and the role of technology. This initial section will also contain a more reflective aspect, where participants question the meaning of isms and the inevitability of divisions based upon them, and also explore their playful, imaginative, emotional, and engaged aspects.

The second section of findings will reveal how the institutional support and challenges to capitalism are discursively associated with

worshipful attitudes towards the three focal entrepreneurs. It will also provide separate sub-sections that demonstrate how the inflection of this idolization differs. Then, the section will develop the idea that these discursive depictions suggest signs of charismatic leadership, which has been theoretically linked with future-directed utopianism. The following sections will advance and expand these findings.

4.2. Diverse, deep, and divided challenges to capitalism

4.2.1. Overview of the discursive challenges to capitalism

The first set of findings is united by their portrayal of the diverse, deep, and divided extent to which discourses of YouTube utopianism exhibit challenges to the institution of capitalism. In this section, we learn that profanation presents a range of heated rational discourses pitting capitalism against communism and socialism, affirming the role of political leadership, and advancing the consideration of other social systems or ways of thinking about the links between motivation and human nature. Another aspect of the profanating discussion challenges green marketing with the idea that the resource hungry version of capitalism as we know it and true environmental sustainability cannot coexist. Another major institutional link to capitalism is technology, and this section finds message posters challenging specific technologies as well as the belief in ever-increasing technology. Capitalism is questioned in an almost poststructural manner and drained of meaning in discussion about the actual meaning and stability of terms such as capitalism and communism, and belief in them. Instead, message posters encourage one another to reflexively examine their own beliefs and habits. In the final section of these findings, the depth of engagement with utopian discourse is examined by showing how messages engage the utopian imagination, activating powerful emotions such as sadness

Table 2
Nemographic field sites and data set descriptions.

YouTube Field Site name and brief description	Would EPCOT Have worked? (Rob Plays, fan question), abbreviated as WEHW?	The Choice is Ours (The Venus Project promotional video), abbreviated as TCIO	The Future We're Building—And Boring (Elon Musk TED Talk), abbreviated as TFWB&B	Totals
YouTube URL: https://www.youtube.com/RWgKEI7Tfa8	Yb5ivvcTvRQ	ziwLWfaAg-8		
Running time of video (hours: minutes: seconds)	01:37:19	00:40:50		2:27:34
Total number of distinct comments and replies, at time of data collection	4975	8073		13,935
Total number of distinct user names	1854	6609		9155
Total number of pages of single-space 12 point text	863	807		1718
Total number of words in comments and replies	241,228	206,305		487,988

and hope, and sparking spontaneous calls to action. These various elements of the challenge to the institutional bases of capitalism transcend the notions of prior wetopian and metopian conceptions, and are presented in the seven sub-sections that follow.

4.2.2. Institutional challenges to capitalism

The first research question asks about the extent to which contemporary discourses of utopianism challenge the institution of capitalism itself. The dataset contains a significant number and variety of these institutional challenges, often cloaked in divisive language and an embrace of extreme political positions. Because social media are dynamic and conversational, context and temporality are critical to the user experience. Although it is difficult to capture context and the fleeting unfolding of conversation in the decontextualized format of a journal article (and to do so without giving the appearance of simply loading up raw data as if it could speak for itself), I will attempt to provide an exchange that offers the reader a more organic sense of how politics and counter-power manifest in these utopian social media comments. My analysis and interpretation will be interspersed with the comments, which are presented within the more naturalistic flow of social media messages.

In this conversation, conducted through comments on the EPCOT WEHW? video, “Tobias Crumbe” opens the discussion with a statement that “The only problem in society is money. Now I am not expressing full communistic viewpoints or anything, I just feel money should be reworked.” Tobias’ comments equate the purported root of all evil, “money”, with contemporary capitalist society; money is the clear focus of the comment. In what amounts to a defensive foreshadowing of the upcoming pouncing, Tobias’ comments attempt to create some distance from the toxicity and stigma of “full communistic viewpoints”, recasting the comment in a more pragmatic form as a ‘reworking’.

Yet despite Tobias’ attempt to proactively create some conceptual distance, within moments, other posters begin protecting capitalism against the ideological threat of the mere mention of “communistic viewpoints”. “Jim Patterson” states his defense as a type of truism: “Communism doesn’t work.” Another commenter brings in contemporary dystopian examples, citing Venezuela’s current dysfunction as a cautionary tale about the hazards of central planning—but ignoring the immense success of China’s adoption of capitalist economic systems. “Jonathan Greene”, however, does raise the example of China, but mentions only negative comments. Jonathan defends capitalism against the threat of communism by citing China’s problems with pollution and dams—but fails to draw any compelling linkage between these problems and the adoption of one institutional system of economics rather than another (and ignoring the massive environmental devastation of, say, oil spills, poisoned waters, and deforestation due to capitalism around the world).

The next commenter offers another pithy truism, as if citing a religious invocation or repeating scripture: “The opposite of socialism is freedom” (“Mark Thomas”). The comment is likely drawn from a popular Internet meme showing a cage full of chickens and a single majestic soaring eagle, and describing the former as socialism, the latter as capitalism. Then, the discourse turns to commentary that questions the link between capitalism, free markets, and the United States. “Garman Jones” argues that the United States is not a free market because the government actually regulates markets. Partisan American politics, which are never far from the surface in 2018, become salient. “Jim Patterson” pipes in again, stating that “The US used to be free market and then Democrats decided to regulate it and make it easier for big corporations to crush their competition”.

At this point, the conversation has strayed far from Tobias Crumbe’s initial comment about the need to rethink, or rework, the concept of money. The discourse continues without him, exploring the proper role of business regulation in capitalist society, the meaning of “free markets”, and the history of Roosevelt’s anti-trust actions. The general thrust of many of these arguments is that capitalism must be freed from

constraint in order to consummate its utopian magic. Contemporary capitalism has been overly constrained by government, these message posters assert, building on earlier contentions by Garman Jones and Jim Patterson.

These ‘capitalism must be freer’ comments reveal the presence of one of the core beliefs of capitalism-as-religion: “According to the religion of Capital, the only salvation consists in the intensification of the system, in capitalist expansion” (Löwy, 2009, p. 68). This is a discussion of “the merciless logic of the capitalist system”—a “semantic field” that Max Weber’s (2013) “iron cage” capitalist critique also encompasses (Löwy, 2009). The discussion is drawn once again to the chief alternative to capitalism by a new commenter. “Jake Winthrop” interjects: “If it is run correctly, communism would work amazing! The problem is that all of the [communist] leaders nowadays are very bad people.” After this comment, more debate ensues about whether communism inevitably leads to starvation, scarcity, and deprivation, or whether this is the fault of communist leaders who have been corrupt and inept in their implementation.

To and fro, back and forth, more capitalism and less capitalism, correctly-run communism and poorly-enacted central planning, good leaders and bad: these topics move in and out of the collective public discourse as one institutional structure after another is mentioned, refuted, countered with aphorism, defended, discarded in favor of a new topic, and subsequently resuscitated. It seems that this is a group of mainly American males, likely white, older, and mainstream, debating their own current political system under the guise of discussing Disney’s utopian plans. The discussion considers political systems, partisanship, history, and leadership, compares systems, and seeks solutions. The examples of Venezuela and China are certain not the only comparisons to contemporary American capitalism. Many other cities, countries, and regions are also considered as the institution of capitalism, and its current manifestation in America, are repeatedly challenged and defended.

4.2.3. Discursive distancing of alternate systems

The distanced (in time and in conceptual space) idea of Disney or The Venus Project’s technologically utopian prototype cities are actively negotiated from a variety of perspectives. Although both of these consumer utopias are Western, capitalist, technological, and futuristic, some comments unexpectedly compare them to Eastern social systems, or ones from the past. “Bradley Preston” comments that TVP’s focus on understanding and changing human behavior, such as its irrational and emotional conditioning “is a very interesting way to tackle such questions” and suggests looking into “Eastern thought process of system thinking... You would be amazed by the level of understanding of human living with nature that has been accomplished without technological advancements. People [from Eastern civilizations] have worked out solutions thousands of years ago and, unfortunately, we dismiss them as them as backwards without even understanding them.”

Comparably, commenting on EPCOT, “Grant Blankerson” suggests that “there’s a reason why the best cities to live in are generally European cities which have existed since the Middle Ages. That’s because they were designed in a world without cars and where every challenge had to be solved by using local resources. This means that these cities are sustainable and sensible, they have good access to all the resources they need and are designed for the people living in them, not a specific product like the car.” Through comparison, these statements remove particular elements of EPCOT and TVP’s proposed utopias from an abstract and unrealized sphere to one that has been accomplished hundreds or even “thousands of years ago” and is still working for local populations. Thus, the social media discussion becomes a platform for the presumably mainly American audience to introduce metopian social and design systems from other global regions, such as the Far East and Europe.

The TFWB&B video comments contain an analogous sort of critical thinking that often introduces city planning comments drawn from the

consideration of alternatives in other cities. Criticizing Elon Musk’s plans to build tunnels beneath Los Angeles for private cars, “FYI” writes “Why not promote public transportation like NYC?” “Patricia Gray” argues that “Public transport also needs to be invested in... There needs to be just as much intellectual investment in finding multiple alternative ways for people to travel with ease and affordably (aside from cars), if we really want to tackle the issues of mass population growth and congestion.”

Although these comments begin with ideas from the utopian YouTube videos, they transcend and pluralize them in the effort to realize a more diverse future: we need ‘multiple other avenues’ as well as Musk’s car-centric consumer utopia. Comparing elements of these utopias to Eastern modes of thought and European urban design introduces elements of effective systems that might be unfamiliar to Americans and invites their consideration. Positioning utopian proposals as only one possible path in a multi-pronged and diverse approach to the improvement of contemporary life is another way that these comments transgress the allegedly solid boundaries that potentially confine thinking to capitalist institutions, particularly its contemporary American manifestations. These comparisons and evaluations, introductions and diversifications are one of the key procedures that the conversants use to effect profanation, bringing utopianism into a mundane and pragmatic conceptual sphere.

The examples reveal at least two important findings present throughout the entire dataset. First, that capitalism is challenged and defended often. It is placed on an altar and knocked off that altar with amazing rapidity and casualness. Second, profanation is an extremely dynamic process. It does not happen once and for all, and not in any sort of coherent argument or conversation. Profanation in the dataset seems like a bunch of teenage boys in a room, passing around a microphone, shouting at each other. However, this is only one of the modalities of the critique of capitalism. There are also those who engage in more nuanced argumentation, and who use the opportunity to challenge taken-for-granted institutions.

4.2.4. Questioning and challenging

The two sections above present very commonplace activities on the datasites: the questioning and challenging of capitalism and other political systems, contentious and cross-talking debate, and the use of the semantic openness of the discussion and social media forum to introduce novel comparisons to other social systems and practices. Another element presented by these utopian topics is to question aspects of the current social system, such as utopian claims of green marketing, the desirability of ever-advancing technological progress, and the inevitability of divisive politics.

4.2.5. Questioning green capitalism

A poster known as “Q..Q...P” encourages other video watchers to show skepticism towards what s/he calls “the ‘environment friendly’ argument” of Elon Musk and his various companies (particularly Tesla), using this stance to launch into a commentary that questions the possibility that any company operating today could ever have a positive relationship with the natural environment:

“The size of humanity and its need for products grows inevitably. The only way [to effect positive environmental change] is not to buy so much stuff and be happy with the circumstances you have. Those people [who are engaged in voluntary simplicity pursuits] need to get the same amount of money as greedy capitalists, the same respect, the same funding and attention, and the same chances to not have to buy cars to get money for work that is badly paid and far away. Tesla is after all a company, like any other. It needs to sell as many products as possible and make them as cheap as possible. Batteries from China, and Chile where there is no real environmental, nor human working conditions control. What future are we actually looking at?”

(Q..Q...P, comments on TFWB&B video)

Q..Q...P's comments transgress the metopian everyday reality of "buying stuff" and then draw out global and governance concerns such as the "environmental regulations" and poor "human working conditions" of other countries. These ideas relate to "political consumerism" (Bossy, 2014), but are more closely linked to voluntary simplicity, which transcends consumerist categories. They question the impact on 'our future' of different aspects of capitalism's hidden realities: labor, population growth, demand for a consumerist lifestyle, globalization, and lack of regulation. Signaling a moral absolute with "the only way", it is readily apparent that Q..Q...P's questioning not only of Tesla, but of the very possibility of green capitalism, rises above the wetopian-metopian framing of the consumerist discourse.

4.2.6. Supporting and questioning technology

All three of this study's datasites are capitalist technological utopias. Industrial-political-consumer cultures around the world measure human progress by the technological improvements of 'standards of living', and employ popular utopian discourses to naturalize the idea that "moral and social betterment" go hand in hand with improvements in technology (Kozinets, 2008, p. 869). Technological utopia is one of the ideological foundations of our current global culture, whether socialist, communist, or capitalist. Thus a final, and important, contour of these institutional challenges lies in questions that explore the difficult contradictions inherent within technological views of utopia.

TFWB&B video commenters often advocate for and question the wisdom of particular technologies, such as drilling an extensive and complex tunnel system beneath seismically active Los Angeles. Others are highly suspicious of Musk's "Neuralink" company's plans to link human brains with digital systems. Some find his notions of space colonization defeatist and unrealistic. Still others praise him for his attempts and work to provide regulation and oversight to the development of artificial intelligence. Certainly, some comments question his motives and technology, such as this one by "Bewild&free": "How is he going to help anyone but himself and millionaire investors? so many important questions to solve at the moment. a world in chaos and stupidity...i don't need super crazy high-tech, i need freedom, equality, the end of destruction of this planet, and not a new one to live on." Overall, however, the tone of the comments on the TFWB&B video is supportive of the idea that capitalist systems will develop technological solutions to solve the problems created by humanity's past systems, technologies, and solutions.

The Venus Project video also embraces the role of technology, but does so with more contingencies and cautions than the other two videos. Fresco's ideas incorporate sophisticated computing systems such as artificial intelligence into production and information facilities that inform the decision making of the collectives who will live in the cities of the future that he proposes. In an age where artificial intelligence technologies are being developed and applied for the benefit of the wealthy capitalist elite, Fresco's ideas are recognized as vital by many of the YouTube video's commenters. However, not all comments about incorporating artificial intelligence into the utopian landscape are positive. Here are the words of CriticalGuy1976: "There's always the dangers inherent in having a machine decide what's best for human beings... and to have a machine in total control of human behavior? "Hal" from "2001, A Space Odyssey"? The computer on board the 'smart-bomb' in "Dark Star"? "Big Brother"?" Drawing on a range of popular culture references, CriticalGuy1976 suggests the threat of autonomous intelligent technology. However, the comment misconstrues the Venus Project's plan, and is thoroughly critiqued, dissected, and corrected by succeeding comments.

We might ask whether technology itself, rather than any particular technology, is questioned on these utopian YouTube discourse sites. Although it is not prevalent, it is possible to find several comments that criticize contemporary society's fascination with the idea that

developing new technologies is synonymous with progress. One of the most insightful and humorous was a comment on the EPCOT WEHW? video by "Subtractingthree", which said "Not every new technology is a great one. Every IOT device and automatic device is painfully useless. Why do I need a coffee maker that is connected to the internet? 'Oh it has a little weather forecast screen and coffee-related news'. Like I need to be annoyed with that? Why does my toilet automatically flush? What if I don't want to flush it? Is it really that hard to push a lever?"

Whether we are considering the lure of particular political and economic systems, such as capitalism or communism, the lessons of Eastern wisdom or Middle Age European city planning, the futility of green capitalism, or the latent appeal of new technologies such as artificial intelligence, the discussions of these YouTube message posters bring a variety of alternate and critical viewpoints together for discussion and debate.

4.2.7. Challenging divisiveness

Numerous comments on the TCiO YouTube video, which seem much more transnational and global than the parochial comments on the EPCOT video, reveal attempts to transcend the polarized and polarizing terms of communism, socialism, and capitalism. In a long, extensive, and detailed comment, "The Mailman" feels a need to unite what initially seem like two polar opposites: "I often see a dualistic view to it: Either Capitalism or Communism, but let's see it at the ends of a spectrum. We don't live in a fully capitalist world. Things like health-care and unemployment benefits are at some point communistic and wouldn't exist in a fully capitalistic 'do or die' system. So when we see it as a spectrum, we can order our actual system - or yours wherever you are in the world - into this spectrum and see where we are and where we want to be and imo [in my opinion] we are far too much on the side of capitalism and can adjust it to some point" (The Mailman, TCiO video on YouTube site, Fall 2017).

Some of the most compelling forms of institutional challenge are those which move beyond challenges to capitalism to question all doctrines. "Zawa Polina" suggests that we ought to cease to define and view "everything thru a primitive lens of the nonsensical 'isms' (i.e., capitalism, socialism, communism) which have no relevance in a sustainable/socially just and peaceful world". Her comments suggest a focus on concrete social goals, rather than on abstracting rhetorical gimmicks. Further, she shifts the terms of the discussion by asking if we can move beyond "isms" and focus instead on mutually beneficial social goals.

Commenting on people's 'lack of faith in humanity and themselves', "Colin Doubleday", a frequent moderator on the Venus Project's YouTube channel and replier to TCiO comments stated: "Capitalism, communism, socialism, etc. are failed systems. The main goal of humanity should be to thrive. It is primitive to create artificial scarcity and chase power. There is a reason why our world is the way it is and it is because of failed systems... We the people can fix it. We all need to change our thinking and come together. It takes effort to change beliefs and habits but humans can do amazing things when they are inspired."

Using the same forward-looking term as Zawa, "primitive", Colin seeks to defamiliarize readers from the institutional constraints of the present. Further, his discursive strategy is to lay the blame on social systems rather than on individuals, political parties, elites, or particular systems. All existing systems are institutionally locked into the past, and thus "primitive", and genuine change will require a paradigm shift on the part not of any particular type of people, but all people: a collective "we" who are "humans". Connecting macro level social change with individual-level thought and action, Colin's comments invite people to question the system by questioning its role in their own lives. His notions take the abstract idea of a system, such as capitalism, and encourage people to address their dissatisfaction with it by referencing the concrete elements of it most familiar to them. According to him, change will require inspiration and determination, but effecting utopianism means questioning our own beliefs, as well as our "habits", which must

include the ways and things we heedlessly consume.

4.2.8. Imagination signified and emotions engaged

The final, and perhaps most crucial, element of these social media utopianist discourses is the manner in which they engage the imagination of their message posters, activating their emotions, and sparking spontaneous calls to action. Writing contemporary social science often means narrating our work in a distanced, objectified manner. However, the ‘crisis of representation’ ruptured this writing style and resulted in a growing body of ethnographic works that are personally expressive, creative, transgressive, innovative, and emotionally engaged (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Lincoln & Denzin, 1994). These qualities are particularly important to this investigation because theories of profanation are associated with the imaginative openness of play. The reflective notes in my immersion journal reveal a closeup look at an inner thought process containing ambivalence, hope, fear, and longing as I consider and try to empathically understand the thousands of hidden actors who are posting these comments. Sometimes, the comments that I found to be the most authentic and moving were among the very simplest ones.

“I fear we won't make it.”—“Wally99”, comment on the TCiO video on YouTube, Feb 2016.

“Wally99 I sometimes think that too bro”—“Larrabee354”, reply

The “we” in this short exchange refers to humanity, and when Wally99 says he fears that “we won't make it”, he is talking about the end our species. Across whatever unascertainable distances separate the two people in this digital exchange, Larrabee354 reaches out and with a simple “bro”, a brotherly street greeting, affirms that excruciatingly sad thought. In my immersion journal, I write:

“After this pondering of the Venus Project's fieldsite, I can't help but note the emotional ambivalence I feel. I get swept up at times in the energy of what seems to be a new global online movement. The most emotionally engaged I feel is when I see these many simple statements, such as “What can I do to help?” “I'm so sad because I want to live in the depicted future, but I don't have enough faith in humanity to believe this is ever going to happen.” And perhaps even more revealing: “Thank you for letting me dream and be part of it. Awesome utopia”. From some of them, I get the sense of utopia being a mental oasis, perhaps an illusion, a future to imagine and escape into, rather than to build. But it isn't long before I encounter the builders and the planners, too, the ones who offer ideas about where and how to start. Some advocate donations, such as to the Venus Project. Others support commercial solutions, like Tesla cars and solar panels. Or consumerist choices like going vegetarian (a topic which is discussed a lot). Others advocate buying a home with some friends, and beginning to live communally, and in a more sustainable way” (Immersion journal notes, after engaging with “The Choice is Ours” video and comments, February 2018).

The referents for these conversational exchanges transcend consumerism, capitalism, socialism, democracy, and hypocrisy. “Thank you for letting me dream,” is not a partisan statement. It is one that involves imagination and gratitude. Neither is ‘I want to live in this depicted future’. In the tumultuous and polarized sociopolitical environment of the present, expressions of frustration and hopelessness are commonplace. But they are counterbalanced by the hopefulness of the utopian imagination. For, especially present in the more international and communal TCiO datasite, there are expressions of an emergent humanism, a concern expressed in the most bare terms. This is interest not in a nation, patriotism, democracy, capitalism, or consumer culture. “How can I help,” they ask. “What can I do to make this a reality?” This is not a mere selfish concern, a metopian longing. It is not a mere channeling of the desire for social change into an environmentally correct purchase, a comparison of brands X and Y. Instead, it is a much broader and deeper concern for humanity, united, a civilization on a finite world, a species.

Prefiguring Levitas' (2013) stance, the great utopian scholar Darko Suvin (1990) wrote that “utopia is a method rather than a state, but I would add that it is a method camouflaging as a state: the state of

affairs is a signifier revealing the presence of a semiotic process of signification which induces in the reader's imagination the signified of a Possible World, not necessarily identical with the signifier” (p. 74). In the dataset, the process of profanation seems to operate in a similar manner, drawing the awareness of comment posters from their current world to the imaginative possibility of a different world and then back again. Posters are not considering single utopias. The utopias are not stable conceptions of capitalism, communism, environmentalism, Orientalism, or technological utopianism. They are in flux and destabilizing. Their contours are shifting, because they are linked to playful imaginative possibilities, rather than concrete plans. This is what Suvin (1990) intriguingly terms “the lesson of the dynamic utopias”, each bumping up against one another, constantly in collision (p. 82). Conversations about utopia and its profanation dialectics are the playful practices where, as he puts it, the “locus constantly tends toward and yet never fuses with horizon” (Suvin, 1990). This continuous inclination without resolution builds tension. It is an imaginative act that is reflected in my immersion notes, inspiring a complex emotional prism of ambivalence, hope, fear, and sadness.

4.2.9. Summary

These findings reveal the challenges to a range of contemporary institutions of the profanating public discussion of utopian capitalist YouTube videos. Discussions were portrayed in the texts as heated, yet rational, discourses that argued, for example, that capitalism is superior to communism, that political leadership matters, or that other social systems or ways of thinking about human nature should be considered. Another aspect of the profanating discussion questioned the possibility that capitalism as we know it and concern for the environment could coexist. Message posters also challenged specific technologies and the view that ever-increasing technology is commensurate with social progress. The very idea of division and of the meaning of isms such as capitalism and communism was also drawn into dispute, with some message posters affirming the need to question our own beliefs and habits, such as the ways and things we heedlessly consume. Finally, the findings in this section demonstrated a playful quality. They showed the ways that the utopian discourse engages the imagination, activating powerful emotions such as sadness and hope, and sparking spontaneous calls to action. As we turn to the next section, we see how new discursive elements related to leadership reveal the close links between challenges to capitalism and the undergirding affirmations of capitalism-as-religion.

4.3. Discourses of leadership, legitimacy, and utopian charisma

4.3.1. Overview of the discourse of utopian charisma

The past section revealed a range of discursive challenges to capitalism and other social systems, sustainable industry, technology, and divisiveness, as well as the engagement of imagination and emotions. In this section, we develop and examine how the institutional challenges to capitalism are linked to a type of religious sentiment surrounding Walt Disney, Jacque Fresco, The Venus Project, and Elon Musk that both affirms and challenges their legitimacy and that of the system supporting them.

Although it was initially unintentional in my sampling of YouTube sites of utopianism, I chose three datasites in which an entrepreneurial figure is strongly associated with the utopian venture. Analysis of the datasets drawn from these sites suggests that the cultic quality of Benjaminian capitalism-as-religion extends to an extreme form of admiration for the charismatic entrepreneurs who promote appealing utopian visions. The following four sections present the findings relating to Disney, Fresco, and Musk in turn, and then conclude with theoretical development of these findings as a type of Weberian charismatic authority.

4.3.2. Disney's dark matter and space program

It may come as little surprise that Walt Disney, who is a household name, is hailed on the WEHW? datasite as a brilliant innovator, inventor, and “visionary”. In the EPCOT video comments, Walt Disney is not only praised as a “genius”, but also a “humanitarian” and a “world-builder” who humbly “began with a mouse”. However, a significant number of comments also hail him as more than this. His idea for EPCOT is portrayed as something truly revolutionary. Replying to a posted question about the potential success of the EPCOT idea on the WEHW? site, “Julia Jefferson” writes:

“The innovation of technology [at EPCOT] would have been very successful, and very likely, we all would have seen innovations like the touch-tone telephone, cellular phone, the modern computer, CDs, DVDs, the internet, and so on, at least a decade before we did. We would have wrist communicators, maybe flying cars, nuclear fusion, dark matter conversion, if not by now, definitely before 2025. Walt Disney was a fucking genius, and he knew that what would come of his genius would not end well. To be able to handle the level of intellect that he had, at a global level, would require one to let go of many of their beliefs.”

According to Julia, Disney was not merely an animator and entertainment producer. He was a brilliant genius with an “extraordinary” and world-changing intellect, someone who could supervise the mastery of scientific challenges such as “nuclear fusion” and “dark matter conversion” and also predict the outcome of his genius upon the world. And this example of praise and adulation is not the selection of a particularly rare piece of data; the site is full of similar levels of excessive praise. Here is what “Brian Johnston” posts on the WEHW? Site:

“I think you fail to realize that had Walt not died and instead had lived to see this succeed, he would have become a financial powerhouse probably more powerful than J.P. Morgan. Apple would now be Disney. Walt would have unlimited resources to do whatever he wanted. He would have his own technological R&D department. I would even imagine he would have his own space program by now. EPCOT would be GE, Apple, NASA, etc...A visionary indeed.”

In Brian's comments, he paints Disney not only as a financial genius, but someone who would end up, in some sense, ruling the world with “unlimited resources” to pursue his vision. The idea that the Disney company would become akin to NASA, and that Walt personally would “have his own space program” is a massive extrapolation from the actual success of an entertainment studio and theme park operator. The linking of space programs, dark matter, and nuclear fusion with the showman and entertainer Disney reveals not only how exaggerated are the perceptions of his potential abilities, but also the utopian lingua franca of futuristic technologies that the posters to this datasite speak.

4.3.3. Fresco's inspiration and TVP conversion stories

Jacque Fresco was an autodidact who worked in industrial design. He was not particularly prolific or successful as an architect and designer and thus is a very different type of character than Disney and Musk. Nonetheless, his futuristic ideas about visionary societies and cities inspired many to follow him, and the videos (produced with his domestic partner, Roxanne Meadows) have made his plans accessible to millions. On the YouTube datasite, the depth of participants' inspiration is oft-stated, and is mixed with a sense of gratitude, as in this post on the TCiO datasite by “Paxton Belair”, which begins by thanking Jacque and Roxanne and then continues:

“Undoubtedly Jacque represents an enormous fortune for the survival of all the species of the planet. This man is incredibly smart, his knowledge is really invaluable and truly relevant to our society. A true genius...You are simply amazing jacque fresco. Definitely every human being on the planet must be exposed to your knowledge. Especially in this totally insane society.”

The praise of Fresco as “smart”, “amazing”, possessing “invaluable” knowledge, and “a true genius” is quite commonplace on the site. Paxton's comments, however, suggest something evangelical, that every person on the planet “must be exposed to your knowledge”. This statement transcends merely liking a plan, or respecting someone's intelligence, and approaches something like religious conversion.

Unlike the other two datasites, where there were few or none, the TCiO site contained a number of conversion-like stories. In these narratives, message posters tell how their lives were inspired or changed by learning about The Venus Project. For example, “Mister Bernie” posts that when he “first discovered the Venus Project, I decided I wanted to finish college and become an engineer for the Venus Project.” This story about TVP encouraging people to become engineers was repeated several times by different persons. However, in Mister Bernie's case, his work at Walmart convinced him that most people are driven by superficial needs to consume and “buy stupid shit. That's their only purpose in life. So inured into the system.” As a result, he said that he had decided instead to travel the world, learn from the different perspectives and then “in doing so, I'll better understand humanity, and how to save it. When I'm ready, I'll devote the rest of my life to the Venus Project.”

“Pierre Lalonde” offers another conversion narrative, addressing it directly to another commenter, “Howard Tilbertson”, who posted that society cannot change because “we are economic slaves to a consumer obsessed system”. In his reply, Pierre states that “Mr. Fresco has been my motivation for many years. He is the reason I became an entrepreneur striving for alternative energy projects on smaller scales to generate more awareness”.

These tales of TVP inspiration are distinct from the more personal worship of Disney and Musk on the other two data sites. TVP inspires a more ideational type of questioning, one that seems emotionally deeper and more linked to a slower, but perhaps more lasting, life change. Yet there is also personal adulation for Fresco. Some address their posted TCiO YouTube comments as if they were speaking directly to Fresco himself, almost as a type of prayer.

“You're an amazing visionary and have one of the most intellectual minds of the population. I would actually love to just live in a Venus Project style world. I would donate all my money and move in now to start building the new world if that was an option... I just want to live it and experience it now. To build the world you see, I would work for free.”

(William Knight, TCiO data site)

That someone would post “I would donate all my money”, or “I would work for free” seems like cultish thinking. But there is also a deep hunger expressed, an unfulfilled, urgent, and important desire for hope for the future of humanity. That religious aspect is also present in a comment by “Allosaurus Rules”: “Someday his genius will be realized, most of the great and influential minds of human history are only acknowledged posthumously.” Here, Fresco is compared to some of the greatest minds in human history, who were only recognized after they died. His lack of mass recognition then becomes a hallmark of how advanced and revolutionary were his thoughts. Fresco died in 2017 at the age of 101. After Fresco died, there was considerable activity on the site praising him and his work. “Craig Undertow,” posted the message “RIP Jacque Fresco, Modern day Nikola Tesla.” Comparing Fresco to Tesla, a mysterious and misunderstood, but undeniably brilliant, figure from history reinforces the idea about Fresco's future legendary status.

Of course, there are also those who find the idolization off-putting. “Phallicus Maximus” chides the group in a post that says “The Venus Project has been a vanity project for a while now. It's no longer about saving the planet and its people, but more about marketing Fresco as some deep visionary who should be worshipped by all.” Yet the negative comments are all but drowned out by the adulation, and even Phallicus' comment, and his presence on the site, indicate that he once believed in the Project and its lofty goals of “saving the planet and its

people”.

4.3.4. *Elon Musk as savior, pitchman, puppet, and devil*

Although there are clearly those who praise and appear to worship Walt Disney and Jacque Fresco, the sheer quantity and emotional weight of these fawning comments is dwarfed in comparison to those garnered by Elon Musk. One of the most initially noticeable things on the TFWB&B datasite is the large number of laudatory and admiring comments directed personally at Elon Musk. The American entrepreneur is praised for his intellect, for his low-key and matter-of-fact self-presentation, his imputed humility and, especially, his vision. “Wow, I had no idea how much of a visionary Musk is,” writes “ghamavgra”, who continues: “This man may indeed single-handedly change or accelerate our future. He is one for the history books.” Numerous posters call him things like “the real life Tony Stark” (“Jim Montana”)—a comparison to Marvel comics’ genius billionaire superhero inventor. In fact, the logic of the superhero is evident in many of the comments around Musk within which he is portrayed as a moral, mighty, larger than life savior figure.

Yet Musk’s adulation, although it clearly predominates among the comments, does not go unquestioned. Numerous individuals, in fact, use the worshipful attitude towards Elon Musk to challenge a variety of different institutionalized attitudes. For example, in a comment heaped with derision, “Q..Q...P” begins by commenting on Musk and the savior cult that gathers around him (“I like the way he behaves, but people overly praise him way more than he deserves”). Then, Q..Q...P links the spectacle, the consumption of image, with the entrepreneur. Again attempting to pull back the curtain on capitalist power relations, s/he calls Musk “a symbol, or puppet” that the Tesla corporation sells.

A variant of these critical comments associates Musk with government tax breaks, subsidies, and other government allocations. In these comments Musk is a con man, his heroic status as environmental savior unmasked as the grifting of an effective huckster pitchman: “The sycophancy from TED [of TED talks] and the hero worship in the comments is laughable. \$5 billion in taxpayer money and you act like he’s the second coming” (“flounder6591”). With these comments, flounder6591 points out how much of the allegedly free enterprise capitalist economic system is supported not only by public money, but also by the ‘sycophantic’ ideological sanctioning and legitimization of capitalist savior figures, typified by the religious inclinations of YouTube message posters who act like Elon Musk is “the second coming” of Jesus Christ.

One revealing exchange begins quite simply when “Takahito Hakamori” posts nine words separated by an ellipsis: “Elon is God...A soul incarnate for helping us”. Although variants of this worshipful attitude are frequent among the posts, this is an extremely clear statement and it gathers 131 replies—a high number for the datasite. The very first reply combines ideas of Elon as false prophet, capitalism, and “dystopia”: “Elon is the Devil, he is selling a Capitalist dystopia that will hurt most people and use up the rest of the finite resources of our planet while ensuring workers have no jobs and the land is covered to make one big racetrack for the rich” (“stinkstankstunkdirt”). Stinkstankstunkdirt continues by saying that Musk is “a perfect example of the failings of Capitalism” as the entrepreneur espouses and tries to create “a future based on sprawling and inefficient private road transport while turning workers into beggars”.

In their development of the “awareness step” of a “critical research” methodology, Murray and Ozanne (1991) describe how critical researchers hope to engage social actors in dialogue to help them see their current situation differently (p. 138). Stinkstankstunkdirt addresses his comment directly to Takahito, communicating as if trying to raise his awareness: “I hope you rethink your position before you are totally lost in pseudo-religious ideology”. Not only is Stinkstankstunkdirt attempting to make Takahito and the other posters aware that their worship of Musk is religious, or ‘pseudo-religious’, he is also trying to awaken them to the ideological functions that this worship is playing in

their support of “Capitalism”—a term that Stinkstankstunkdirt always capitalizes, perhaps to signal its status as a sacrosanct ideology. Making explicit, countering, and directly challenging pseudo-religious belief and ideology, Stinkstankstunkdirt is trying to engage social actors in a dialogue to reveal and alter embedded institutionalized thinking, just as a critical researcher would do.

4.3.5. *The charisma of utopian leaders*

The term “charisma” is used often by management, political science, and sociology scholars to refer to transformational leaders who possess superhuman qualities (Willner, 1984), “exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character” (Eisenstadt, 1968, p. 46), and have “profound and extraordinary effects on followers” (House & Baetz, 1979, p. 399). Weber, who conceived of charismatic authority, also ascribed to it “a revolutionary and counternormative quality” and even a type of magical ability (Conger & Kanungo, 1987, p. 638). The comments about Disney, Fresco, and Musk portray exactly this sort of exceptional, magical, superhuman charismatic leadership. Although there are challenges to this depiction, the comments of Julia Jefferson, Pierre Lalonde, ghamavgra, and Takahito Hakamori, among many other, indicate that Weber’s (1947) notion of charismatic leadership extends not only to influence within particular companies, but to consumption of that company’s products—and ideas—by the wider public. Capitalism-as-religion thus can be said to encompass various prophets, such as Disney and Musk, whose “divine” leadership qualities set them “apart from ordinary men” and result in their being “treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman” or “exceptional powers” (Weber, 1947, 10).

Moreover, there are strong signals to indicate that the utopian stance of these entrepreneurs is implicated in their charisma. Conger and Kanungo (1987) explicitly make the connection: “The more idealized or utopian the goal advocated by the leader, the more discrepant it is relative to the status quo. And, the greater the discrepancy of the goal from the status quo, the more likely followers will attribute extraordinary vision to the leader... In religion, charisma stems from prophecy; in organizations, charisma stems from advocacy for the future” (p. 640–642). Advocating for a particular capitalist, technological version of the future is exactly what we see from Disney, Fresco, and Musk. Not only is the institution of capitalism viewed as sacrosanct, but its prophets of the future contribute to and reinforce its religious status.

4.3.6. *Summary*

The second finding revealed how the institutional support and challenges to capitalism are discursively associated with a worshipful attitude towards the three focal entrepreneurs. The inflection of this entrepreneur idolization on each of the datasites was different. Walt Disney was seen as an impossibly brilliant figure, one who inspires awe. Fresco is viewed as an inspirational and tragic genius, who was lost to the world before his brilliant ideas could be recognized and realized. Musk is a complex savior figure who is also mistrusted. Each of these discursive depictions reveal the signs of charismatic leadership, and this business leadership style has also been linked in the theoretical literature with future-directed utopianism. This summary of the second finding completes the findings sections. The article now turns to its final section, the discussion of results.

5. Discussion

5.1. *Initial overview*

Although it may raise more questions, ultimately, than it answers, this article reveals how consumers use social media for utopian discursive projects that challenge dominant institutions such as capitalism and consumer culture. In aggregate, with nearly 14,000 voices contributing a total of a half a million words into what this project collected as a dataset, the text provides a glimpse into a slice of

contemporary human activity. That activity, YouTube utopianism, ranges from eloquent narrative construction to polarized politics, from worship to disdain, from unquestioning acceptance of the status quo to inspired quests to learn, travel, improve oneself, and use entrepreneurship to make the world a better place. What we see in these discourses is divisive ideology (because this is an America cultural dataset in 2017–2018), random ridiculousness such as flat earth conspiracy theories (because this is YouTube), and also pragmatism (because some people appear to take some of these discussions seriously). The discourse in many cases and in many ways is intelligent and reflexive, and it results again and again not only in astute questions about capitalism, socialism, and other isms, but also in challenges to marketing formulations such as “green consumption”, valorized entrepreneur figures, and the blind acceptance of technology as progress. This is by no means an unlimited range of topics or practices, or a universal participation. In fact, many cultural constraints are evident. But in a spirit of play, message posters come together and discuss what would otherwise be unutterable: changes to the system.

The remainder of this section explores the two remaining sets of research questions in some depth. First, it inquires as to the nature of profanation, as revealed by the analysis of the collected data. What do the findings say about profanation's playful aspects, and what can we learn about profanation from them? Then, the discussion section turns to a consideration of counter-power. The final section of this article will answer what type of activism or clicktivism is represented by these findings about utopianist social media discourses. The article concludes by developing its implications for our understanding of both utopianism and consumer activism.

5.2. *Playing with the system*

What is “play”? Play is the necessary source of creativity, according to [Huizinga \(1955\)](#), who also says that it is: free, and freedom; extraordinary, and not real life; distant from and more contained than ordinary life; order creating; rule following; and free of encumbrance from money, profit, or business interests. The most closely related theoretical idea in this investigation is the notion of ‘playing with utopia’ ([Agamben, 2007](#); [Murtola, 2010](#)). Playing with utopia the way that a child plays with blocks, consumers are given permission to temporarily imagine their world as other than it currently is.

The postings of social media, with all of their warts, trolls, insults, cruelty, flaming, and conflicts meet [Huizinga's \(1955\)](#) standards and are thus a form of play—a freedom, with a large range of permitted activities, to engage the imagination and think about major social problems, crises, and their solutions. [Caillois \(2001\)](#) adds to [Huizinga's \(1955\)](#) conceptualization that there are four core elements and two general types of play: *agon*, which is competition; *alea* which is chance; *mimicry*, role playing; and *ilinx*, vertigo that alters perspective, perception, and mind. It is the latter of these, *ilinx*, which is most tantalizing to consider in the utopian context. For although we can detect a hint of competition, a touch of chance, and some memesis among the aggressive, emergent word play and ideological and interpellative role modelling of the YouTube utopianists, *ilinx* suggests that watching utopias and engaging in imaginative speculation about their possible better future worlds is similar in some ways to taking psychedelic drugs or riding a roller coaster.

YouTube is an entertainment channel, and thus one interpretive frame that helps make sense of these findings is to see this type of discourse as a form of entertainment consumption. Rather than seeking out the latest metopia of a sports game to watch, app to install, or beer to drink, people might watch a utopian YouTube video about the vision of a modern saviour figure, post a few comments, and dream about a better future. For those moments, in their minds, they have infinite power. No longer are they consumers choosing between alternatives in a neoliberal technocapitalist world. They are utopian dreamers, like their visionary leaders. The videos, especially the professionally

produced TCiO by The Venus Project, transport them to new worlds of possibilities, where current and near-future technologies are put together for the benefit of regular people, like them. The ride can be emotionally exhilarating while it lasts, and exhausting and discouraging when it ends.

What, then, does such a ride mean to challenges to capitalism? In the findings of this research, capitalist challenges were interrelated with challenges to consumer culture. Morally evaluating how consumption is linked to production, and scientifically understanding the long-term consequences of these embedded institutions, is at the heart of some of our society's most urgent questions. The space of utopian discussion in social media allows people from around the world to converse on these topics at a time where they are truly needed, when many scientists say we have little more than a decade to make major institutional changes or face disastrous climate consequence. Can these conversations somehow be construed to have meaningful, rather than merely entertaining and playful, implications in and of themselves? Are they activism? Or are they merely clicktivism? Could that clicktivism be considered a political act? Are the discourses important? The following subsections discuss these key issues to conclude the article.

5.3. *Is profanation activism?*

Activism must help translate “private problems into public issues” and thus ‘re-collectivize’ the “privatized utopias of ‘life politics’ so that one can acquire once more the shape of the visions of the ‘good society’” ([Bauman, 2000, p. 51](#)). Profanation is about the playful desecralizing of private concerns about the state of the world and their transformation into public matters of discourse. According to [Bauman \(2000\)](#), the key to reinvigorating people's moral responsibilities and sense of consideration of each other and the future, is through people collectively sharing “a life of continuous and multi-faceted relationships” ([Fenton, 2008, p. 243](#)). The important further questions that this research raises relate to whether we see glimmers of this life in the comments of the YouTube utopians.

Do we have evidence that these discourses activate a sense of moral responsibility? Certainly, we do. Moral lessons and moral reflection on society and its current state play a major role in these online discussions. This article has been filled with examples of people asserting, defending, debating, and ridiculing moral stances—the heterogeneous voices of the multitude coming together around similar utopian notions to discuss and debate society and its betterment. Do these moral debates awaken an urge to try to ‘manage common affairs’, to awaken a collective sense of power for people to act as a public, beyond being consumers trapped into the market-based responses of wetopian consumer choice agents? Does that urge serve as a sort of social itch, a contagion that could lead to more organization, more hunger for change, and perhaps actions that reflect at institutional levels? It seems rather unlikely. It may make more sense to consider these online postings not as activism per se, but instead as a form of clicktivism. And, once we consider that, we can conclude the section and the article by connecting clicktivism, activism, and political action with our findings in order to be able to answer our remaining questions about how utopianism, metopianism, and wetopianism interrelate with the wider cultural systems that reflect, support, and alter capitalism.

5.4. *Are public acts of utopianism clicktivism?*

Posting offhand comments about capitalism on a YouTube video about Elon Musk could be seen as a form of clicktivism, a simplification of participatory practices, what [Halupka \(2014, p. 116\)](#) calls a “streamlining of online processes [that] has created a societal disposition toward feel-good, ‘easy’ activism”. Most scholars describe clicktivism in similarly derogatory fashion, as a “lazy or overly convenient alternative to the effort and legitimacy of traditional engagement” ([Halupka, 2014](#)). But clicktivism could well be a legitimate form of

political engagement in a world where a large percentage of adults communicate through social media. “Individuals with a conscious political ideology may seek out and engage via clicktivism in an attempt to further their position. Nevertheless, clicktivism is largely a reactive and impromptu form of political participation” (Halupka, 2014, p. 119). Clicktivism has been framed largely as a “disposable” and a “non-committal act”—one full of sound and fury that but ultimately achieves almost nothing.

Except that it achieves play. It creates imaginary worlds. It exchanges ideas, and these ideas critique current institutions and relate to the creation of a better world. Playing with utopian idea(s) can and probably should “be a part of an activist’s larger participatory repertoire” (Halupka, 2014), as a type of method, as both Suvin (1990) and Levitas (2013) suggest for utopia. Clicktivism “is still a reflexive act”, it develops the atrophied (perhaps for many or most consumers) muscles of a subconscious “moral/ethical/political” personal code of practice and belief, providing an opportunity to sharpen their awareness of pre-existing beliefs and unexamined habits and perhaps, eventually, to overturn those attitudes and behaviors (Halupka, 2014, p. 119).

5.5. Is clicktivism a political act?

Political action is an action taken to effect change in government (Batt & Dannenberg, 1919). Voting is the ultimate political action, as are campaigning or running for office in today’s social structurings of “democracy”. However, these are not the only political acts possible. The variety of individual acts of political action are the key focus of Milbrath’s (1965) hierarchy of political participation. Milbrath (1965) saw political participation as a type of spectrum of involvement and activity. People start as spectators, beginning to awaken their political consciousness through reading, discussing, display, and other identity-centric moves. Then, they begin to transition to higher levels of involvement by attending a rally or political meeting, or contributing money to a political cause. Finally, at a highly involved level, they engage in what Milbrath (1965) called “gladiatorial activities” such as volunteering for political campaigns, becoming party members, or running for and holding a political office.

The question that remains is whether digital activism fits as a type of political participation. George and Leidner (2018) make clear that it does. Using terms like “digital action repertoires”, Selander and Jarvenpaa (2016) acknowledge the rainbow-like spectrum of possibilities for action exhibited by digital activism, which are at least as varied as those in Milbrath’s (1965) political participation continuum. It is worth noting that many countries have strict laws about dissent that cover postings on social media and, as a consequence, in those nations critiquing capitalism or communism in public will get one arrested, imprisoned, and even executed (Agarwal, Lim, & Wigand, 2012). If discourse that delegitimizes capitalism and seeks to foster reflective political self-awareness is so important in public contexts, why would we devalue it when it occurs through online communication? Only because it is “virtual”?

According to George and Leidner (2018), clicktivism may well be the gateway drug of 21st century digital political participation, a form of civic engagement that could eventually lead to more active forms. As we think about the utopian social media challenges to capitalism and consumer society, which are united in our findings, we can see metopianism and wetopianism as points along a continuum of contemporary consumer activist as well as political participation. At the metopian stage, Murtola’s (2010) oblivious lotus eaters are unquestioning consumers who do not discuss political utopias. This may be the vast majority of consumers—currently we have little data about percentages, beyond provocative hints such Rainie, Smith, Schlozman, Brady, and Verba’s (2012) Pew survey findings that 66% of social media users have shared their political views online.

The first step in online political participation is generally

clicktivism. Clicktivism could then lead to a wetopian type of commitment to activism, such as donating to a cause or engaging in a political consumerist boycott or boycott. Perhaps because its authors are information scientists, George and Leidner (2018) place data hacking activities—data activism, exposing hidden information, and hacktivism—at the pinnacle of their “digital activism hierarchy” (p. 2303). However, the current research suggests that we can envision a range of other activities that might indicate increased involvement in online political participation, such as joining a group that organizes and plans a small-scale local alternative to consumerist capitalism, or moderating a discussion such as the one moderated on The Venus Project’s YouTube channel.

These ideas are closely related to Jenkins’ (2016, p. 29) notion of the “civic imagination”, which he defines as “the capacity to imagine alternatives to current social, political, or economic institutions or problems”. In our current milieu, spreading and inspiring civic imagination through social media may be an important precursor to institutional change. As Jenkins (2016) reminds us, before someone can change the world, that person must first imagine what a better world might look like, and then to imagine themselves “as an active political agent” who can act to bring that world into being. The discourses depicted in this article help achieve the former goal, but not the latter.

5.5.1. Conclusion: is social media utopian discourse important?

In conclusion, we might extend to these capitalism-challenging and world-improving types of social media discourses what Kozinets (2002, p. 36–37) said about Burning Man’s revolutionary potential. Dismissing them as irrelevant may miss the point. Clicktivist utopianism is the first step towards a change. It is not the final destination, but perhaps it is a prelude to an examination of consumer identity and a wider call for collective change. Clicktivist utopianism does not actually solve the world’s problems or overturn capitalism, nor does it need to force or organize these political acts. Instead, it offers a discursive space set apart from other activities allowing anyone who is interested to play with and within the contradictions of contemporary social systems such as consumer capitalism.

Utopia is a method, and reducing utopianist discourse to pure catharsis ignores the role of imagination in planning personal and social change. We have no idea about the various interconnections of these utopianist discourses to the many social worlds they touch, Might they play a role interconnected with the consideration of conversations with family and friends, the populism of local festivals, the overt actions of petitions and marches? Might their longing, emotional resonance, suspension of ordinary reality, and challenging of ideologies and institutions provide a resistant experience and role model on which to build longer-term social change? Might these qualities begin to act as flies in the institutionalized ointments of contemporary capitalism and its consumer culture? Transformative research into contemporary consumer activism and political participation might gain added insight and social relevance by continuing to empirically explore and theorize the various imaginative worlds and social acts interconnected with the clicktivism of utopian social media discourse.

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