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## ACADEMIC PAPER

WILEY

# Consumer mischief as playful resistance to marketing in Twitter hashtag hijacking

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## Abstract

While both brand advocacy and protest have long been theorised as key facets in consumers' behaviour, we submit that in the participatory culture of social media, where consumers are free to create and publish their own content, the mischievous play has also become an inevitable form of online culture that brands must deal with. Drawing from Caillois' sociology of play and the cultural power model, we explore how consumers may playfully hijack brands' User-Generated-Content (UGC) hashtag campaigns. Based on a non-participatory netnography, we observed consumers' tweets to unpack their playfulness in responding to brands' marketing communication messages on Twitter and then theorised how consumers use mischief as a form of resistance against marketing practice rather than brands themselves.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

I do love it when the internet unites to ruin a really good social media campaign! Oh Internet! #WalkersWave. (EJ, 2017)

EJ's tweet illustrates mischief in consumers' behaviour when they hijacked the hashtag #WalkersWave User-Generated-Content (UGC) campaign on Twitter. There is no expression of anger or contempt towards a brand that may suggest brand activism, but rather an expression of enjoyment at undoing the efforts of marketers.

Hashtag hijacking can occur in the form of simple text posts or in memes, including GIF (graphic interchange format), catchphrase and parody clips. The phenomenon suggests that for social media campaigns that invite participation, firms have little control over users' reactions, as multiple voices can shift the narrative in different directions (Chewning, 2015). The result is that even though UGC has

become an important engagement tool for brands (Daugherty et al., 2008), marketers have to face a new challenge of playful consumer mischief.

UGC is believed to boost credibility, increase trust (Choi & Lee, 2017) and enhance brand engagement (Geurin & Burch, 2017) at a meagre cost (Lawrence et al., 2013). Although a rich body of knowledge has been generated on this topic over the last decade, academic discourse risks over-rationalising and instrumentalising users' motivations for engaging with UGC, creating a dichotomous discussion of either brand advocacy or brand protest (Berthon et al., 2008). An under-researched angle is the apparent playfulness of consumers' engagement with UGC campaigns which is neither advocacy nor protest but may be directed at marketing itself.

Our aim then is to examine consumers' impish acts of hijacking hashtags in sponsored UGC campaigns through the lens of play. We will first critically engage with existing literature on UGC as it relates to brand advocacy, activism, and power. We then deploy Caillois' sociology derived from play (1961) and the cultural power model proposed by Denegri-Knott et al. (2006) to analyse data from a non-participatory netnography of two case studies selected from a broader analysis of UGC marketing campaigns on Twitter. From this, we

The research was conducted as part of the Post Graduate Dissertation by Hong-Bich Truong and the research was approved by the Ethics Committee of University of Southampton. Her current address: 352 Hai Ba Trung, Ward 6, Dalat, Vietnam.

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explain how various consumer mischief can represent a form of play that is resistive to the power of online corporate marketing.

### 1.1 | Consumers' engagement with brands on social media

UGC on social networks is produced either spontaneously or in response to brands' initiatives (Muñiz et al., 2007). Previous research has explored a diversity of motivations to engage with brand-related UGC. For example, consumers may be gratified when they create and share content since their opinions are recognised by the like-minded in what Daugherty et al. (2008) stated as a sense of belonging. Alternatively, users engage with UGC creation because of intrinsic enjoyment (Muntinga et al., 2011). But in any case, consumers may positively influence dialogues about brands within their online communities (Christodoulides et al., 2012). Recognising this, brand marketers are increasingly inviting consumers to engage with them directly such that online communities of consumers create brand value (Schau et al., 2009).

Yet UGC can also be a means for consumers to damage brands they do not like (Vanden Bergh et al., 2011). When consumers are dissatisfied with products or services or their loyalty to brands is betrayed, they may also generate negative content to vent their frustration, "punish" brands, or seek revenge (Grégoire et al., 2009). Such behaviours may even be on the rise. Ranging from organised resistance and boycott as consumer self-realisation (Kozinets & Handelman, 1998) to self-disidentification with aspects of the market (Ruppel & Einwiller, 2021), consumers' activism may change the social order (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004) and influence the market dynamics (Giesler, 2012).

Forms of resistance in online media differ; however, the full range of forms may not be acknowledged by existing studies. For example, Denegri-Knott et al. (2006) provide a review of consumer power and resistance more generally that suggests a consumer sovereignty model of power, a discursive power model, and another based on cultural power. The sovereignty model focuses on consumers' rational decision-making to orchestrate their resources in different forms of empowerment exercises against organisations and assumes that consumers are autonomous, well-informed, and possess greater power than producers. Organised online activism against brands could be considered as an example of the sovereignty model. Such collective actions can lead to consumers boycotts (Klein et al., 2004) and anti-consumption movements (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004) that can be seen in, for example, anti-Starbucks brand avoidance (Thompson & Arsel, 2004).

Alternatively, recent research also reveals the discursive power model, building on the work of Foucault (1988) and highlighting the inclusive interactions between producers and consumers, from which alternative spaces for knowledge and action are created. It posits that although certain consumer events and practices define their identity, consumers also find ways to reclaim power through the same discursive practices (Mikkonen & Bajde, 2013). Therefore, this later mode of

power is less obvious, visible, and organised yet can potentially impact marketers' actions. Penaloza and Price (1993) took up Poster's (1992) definition of such resistance as: "the way in which individuals or groups practice a strategy of appropriation in response to structures of domination." Fournier (1998) then proposed a continuum of resistance, ranging from avoidance to minimisation behaviours and more rebellious acts like boycotting or complaining. Lee et al. (2011) further explored a convergence of consumer resistance and anti-consumption that can be seen in activities against certain products and their practices. Notably, boycotting behaviour has gained attention from researchers as these collective movements are highly visible and scalable (Braunsberger & Buckler, 2011; Kozinets & Handelman, 1998).

Note here, though, that power remains conceived as between consumers and specific brands and not between consumers and marketing itself. Current discourse views consumer resistance against brands in social media as a form of activism against corporate hegemony but discounts other possible motives for engagement with social media marketing, including a playfulness that is neither consciously supportive of a brand nor a deliberate form of resistance to it. As an aspect of the cultural model of power, the play potential of the online community, in particular, is downplayed when the discourse emphasises the functional aspects of platforms when it comes to consumer-brand relationships, and we'll explore this further below.

### 1.2 | Theorising hashtag hijacks

The widespread use of the hashtags (#) began with Twitter, where they were introduced to categorise content to make it easily discoverable. A hashtag adds a searchable word or phrase to a post, allowing content to be grouped together. Hashtags have become an integral part of social media communication, and brands have used them as a marketing instrument to track consumers' discussions about their brands. Brands may also define hashtags in UGC campaigns to engage with social media users. While UGC Hashtag campaigns have successfully created engagement, such as #ShareACoke of Coca-Cola (O'Reilly, 2013) or #whitecupcontest of Starbucks (Simpson & Jack, 2016), others have backfired when users deviate from the intended goal of organisations, shifting campaigns in unfavourable directions. When this phenomenon happens on a big scale, it is referred to as hashtag hijack (Xanthopoulos & Panagopoulos, 2016).

Consistent with prior work on consumer resistance, research has positioned hashtag hijacking as a form of activism or outrage against organisations. For example, #McDStories of McDonald's was perceived as a backlash from activist groups to publicly shame the McDonald's brand (Gilkerson & Berg, 2018). The fast-food giant invited Twitter users to share their good experiences with them. Instead, people used #McDStories to share McDonald's horror stories that were then quickly retweeted. Indeed, global corporations often draw the attention of activist movements. McDonald's was not only the target of activists once with #McDStories in 2012 but faced harsh "brand activism" (Gilkerson & Berg, 2018) again in the #CheerstoSochi campaign in 2014 when it was one of the sponsors

for Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia. Gilkerson and Berg's (2018) theorised hashtag hijacks as an act of consumer activism. Also, according to Rauschnabel et al. (2019), there are 10 different possible motivations for social media users to use a hashtag that includes amusing, organising, designing, endorsing etc., which suggests a need to explore further a wide range of motivations related to hijacking of hashtags, including the relationship between amusement and play, and acts of marketplace resistance.

We now explore playfulness in culture in more detail. Dismissing play as trivial, childish, or peripheral to human activity, Huizinga (1949) argued for play as a foundation for human culture, noting that play exists in almost every human activity, from the law, war, and philosophy. Grayson (1998) pointed to this argument when claiming that the interactions between marketers and consumers inevitably also involve play that can be either harmless or threatening to marketers, depending on whether consumers follow or break the rules.

A tendency for playfulness to emerge within cultures is further revealed by Caillois' sociology derived from play. From this perspective, we can entertain consumer mischief as a form of playful resistance through the cultural power model, which draws from De Certeau (1984). The cultural model emphasises consumers' creative and agentic tactics to playfully resist the power of corporate marketing itself, that is, to make a game of the experience of marketplace power relations. As an everyday tactic, consumers may mischievously engage with UGC campaigns to subvert what is imposed on them. These acts reveal a playfulness in culture directed against the power of marketing itself and not directly complaint against the brand. Consumers resistance is towards promotional campaigns experienced as an intrusion into their online space. They resist marketing by playing with marketing campaigns.

Developing Huizinga's ideas, Caillois (1961) defines play as "free, separate, uncertain, and unproductive, yet regulated and make-believe". In his typology, the rule-following type of play (*Ludus*) is arbitrary and imperative, whereas the rule-breaking type of play (*Paidia*) is self-oriented, capricious, and anarchic (p. 13). *Paidia*—from the Greek word for the child—is intrinsically motivated, unstructured, and dominated by "free improvisation, carefree gaiety and uncontrolled fantasy" (p. 13), capturing the "spontaneous manifestations of the play instinct" (p. 28) in culture. Previously, Molesworth and Denegri-Knott (2008) have drawn from Caillois' work to explain the tension between consumers' *Paidia* play and corporates' requirements for *Ludus* on the eBay platform. Although *Paidia* play is where humans freely express themselves without the limitations of social rules, market systems require the formal rules of *Ludus*. Although markets are inherently playful, *Paidia* represents something of a risk. The mischief of hashtag hijacking can be explained by the *Paidia* form of play.

Play is, therefore, a creative way of resisting corporate hegemony and Denegri-Knott et al. (2006) classified it as part of a cultural power model based on De Certeau (1984) who introduces two distinctive concepts, "strategies" and "tactics" to refer to the practices of "the dominant" and "the weak", respectively. Even though these two logics of action are borrowed from the military, he used them in a different

sense. De Certeau (1984) called "a strategy the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power can be isolated" (p.36). In this sense, strategies refer to those with authority and resources to homogenise their audiences to gain benefits, or what Caillois might note as a *Ludus* form of play. However, when the weak are confronted with a set of rules imposed on them, they "constantly manipulate events to turn them into opportunities" (De Certeau, 1984, p. 20) as tactics, or what Caillois might define as *Paidia*. Such tactics aim to create a more "habitable" space for themselves; hence, consumers create *Paidia* forms of play to live within market systems' dominating tendency. In combination with sociology derived from play and the cultural power model provides a conceptual basis to unpack mischief in online consumer behaviour.

## 2 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

Twitter is one of the world's largest social media platforms used by brands to engage with consumers via UGC Hashtag campaigns and so provides a rich and accessible source of data for research (Liu et al., 2017). Brands have extensively used Twitter to attract and retain customers (Jiang & Erdem, 2016; enhance customers engagement (Okazaki, Díaz-Martín, Rozano & Menéndez-Benito, 2015; Taecharungroj, 2015). Prior research also shows that Twitter can disseminate marketing messages and provide marketers meaningful insights (Chu & Sung, 2015). Twitter is more brand-related than other social media platforms due to its strong association with sharing and discussing culture (Smith et al., 2012), making itself a catalyst for hashtag hijacks. According to these authors, brands are likely to yield more engagement and critical attention on Twitter than other platforms. The limitation of the number of characters on each post, the dynamic nature of the communication and the active participation from both brands and consumers make Twitter ideally suitable for UGCs, and hence an appropriate choice for researching hijacking such campaigns.

As an established platform, Twitter reveals the mischievous behaviour types illustrated in the extended timeframe of tweets presented in this study. Notable examples dated back in 2011, such as #QantasLuxury, while others were more recent, such as #WalkersWave in 2017. Even more recent hijacked hashtags were also recorded, such as the #DaretoCreate from Adidas UK (Thomas, 2019) or #MayThe4th from Disney (Barone, 2020). These extended timelines illustrate the continuation of the playful nature of consumers on Twitter as an enduring aspect of consumer culture, rather than a limited response to a new platform or opportunity to engage with brands. For this reason, we selected examples that represent an extended timescale.

We draw from a netnographic approach, a method that seeks to better understand cultural experiences through online social media engagement. Netnography allows the researchers to observe, interact, collect, then interpret consumers' "online traces" and interactions

(Kozinets, 2020). We follow the guidance of Kozinets (2020) to conduct a 2-phase study: Immersive and Investigative. First, the lead researcher immersed themselves in the Twittersphere to capture a broad context on how to hashtag hijacks happened to corporate brands. The research team then investigated a smaller set of data relevant to our specific research question (Kozinets, 2020).

We started the Immersive phase by conducting a Google search with terms like “brands UGC campaign hijack”, “Twitter hashtag campaign fails”, “brands hashtag fails” to identify popular UGC hashtag campaigns instigated by brands on Twitter. This search identified 12 major brand based UGC campaigns across different industries, including McDonald's, Starbucks, and Walker Crisps (see Table 1. below). Successful campaigns that reported positive results were then left aside, and unsuccessful campaigns that had been hijacked were shortlisted for further investigation. We also reviewed media reports around the unsuccessful campaigns, and there were instances of reported activism (McDonald's) and hijacking of hashtags in other campaigns. We then used Twitter Advanced Search and Web Scraper—a computer software tool that automates the collection of relevant posts—to gather tweets relating to these hijacked campaigns.

Previous work that used hashtag campaigns as the sources for data collection has provided a benchmark for our work in terms of the number of tweets to be collected. For example, Sanderson et al. (2016) explored how a Twitter PR campaign was hijacked by fans by looking at approximately 1200 tweets, and 255 images and 89 pages of texts were used by Matich et al. (2019) to understand a feminist movement better. In a study to trace the development of #NBCFail in the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics, Girginova (2016) looked at around 590 tweets and researched to explore Starbucks' marketing strategy on Twitter Taecharungroj (2017) analysed about 560 tweets.

Our Investigative phase involved a conscientious filtering and review process of 1542 tweets captured from Web Scraper. We then shortlisted 323 tweets and retweets with evidence of playfulness and used them for data analysis (see Table 2. below). Playfulness was

identified as a deliberate subversion of the campaign's intention (Mischief) and jokes, sarcasm, ridicule, and laughter at the expense of the campaign. We further noted when such engagements were offered during the campaign. Each tweet was collected by taking screenshots and organising them into groups. Key themes were then identified to unpack the cultural insights behind these playful tweets. Data was collected during the summer of 2017, even though Twitter users' posts were not limited during this period but varied depending on the launch date of the UGC Hashtag campaigns on Twitter.

We chose the case studies of #QantasLuxury and #Walkerswave as representative examples because they garnered media attention for a spontaneous, playful hashtag hijack. As shown in Table 1 above, there have been multiple playful non-activism hashtag hijacks which could also be analysed through the lens of play.

We shall now present the results with illustrative examples. We have followed Kozinets' (2020) guidance regarding the anonymity of online posters studied. Brands and consumers' posts were print-screened and kept as they were; all emoticons' initialisms are kept unchanged to ensure the expressions are not distorted.

### 3 | RESULTS

We used an integrated analysis structure to present selected posts from UGC hashtag campaigns instigated by brands. We first consider the mischief against marketing practice in different illustrations. These may be understood as what Caillois (1961) refers to as *Paidia*, emergent and unorganised creativity that transforms the experience of those involved, rather than as either brand activism or advocacy. Secondly, we establish that this form of engagement is a “tactic” or expression of power through the cultural power model described by Denegri-Knott et al. (2006). Each tweet, retweet or tweet conversation serves as a unit of analysis. All of them are print screened directly from Twitter as verbatim; therefore, spelling mistakes, if any, are kept as they are from original users' posts to preserve authenticity.

**TABLE 1** Summary of the user-generated campaigns

UGC hashtag campaigns	Brands	Year	Country	Success	Activism or hijacking
#qantasluxury	Qantas Airlines	2011	Australia		x
#McDstories	McDonald's	2012	United States		x
#spreadthecheer	Starbucks	2012	United States		x
#waitrosereasons	Waitrose	2012	United Kingdom	x	x
#askJPM	JP Morgan	2013	United States		x
#shareacoke	Coca-Cola	2014	United States	x	
#whitecupcontest	Starbucks	2014	United States	x	
#askventra	Chicago Transit Authority	2014	United States		x
#yourtaxi	Victorian Taxi Association	2015	Australia		x
#coalisamazing	Australian Mineral Council	2015	Australia		x
#tell us #feedback #ALDI	ALDI Australia	2016	Australia		x
#walkerswave	Walkers Crisps	2017	United Kingdom		x

Note: The media reports determined the success of the campaign.

**TABLE 2** Summary of data

Hashtag (#)	Brands	Classification	
		Mischief as paidia play	Mischief as power
#qantasluxury	Qantas Airlines (Australia)	1	
#walkerswave	Walkers Crisps (Pepsi UK)	27	
<i>Being sarcastic and playful about the campaigns' mishap or the hashtag itself (113 tweets)</i>			
#walkerwave			18
#qantasluxury			29
#waitrosereasons	Waitrose (United Kingdom)		53
Others (#McDStories, #askventra, #yourtaxi, #spreadthecheer, #askJPM, #coalisamazing)	Mc Donald's (United States), Ventra (United States), Victorian Taxi Association (Australia), Starbucks UK, JP Morgan (United States), Mineral Council of Australia		13
<i>Ridicule marketers or marketing disciplines (83 tweets)</i>			
#qantasluxury			25
#walkerswave			42
Others (#askventra, #yourtaxi, #McDStories, #waitrosereasons, #tellus #feedback #ALDI, #coalisamazing)			16
<i>Laugh/enjoy seeing corporations' marketing failure (84 tweets)</i>			
#qantasluxury			9
#walkerswave			57
Others (#spreadthecheer, #yourtaxi, #McDStories, #waitrosereasons)			18
<i>Keep on playing after brands apologised (15 tweets)</i>			
#walkerswave			15
Total		323	

### 3.1 | Mischief as Paidia

One of the most popular forms of UGC hashtag campaigns on Twitter is when brands invite users to enter a competition. By posting entries that include a given hashtag from brands, consumers have chances to win prizes. Yet Twitter users use competitions to ridicule marketing professions by responding with the most freely created content. Consumers know what marketers want—the rules of the game as Ludus—but consciously create new games as Paidia, creating a space to resist the organised intent of marketers.

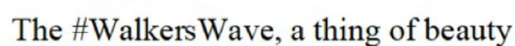
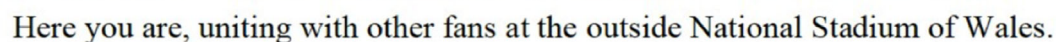
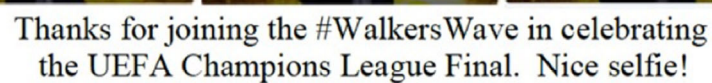
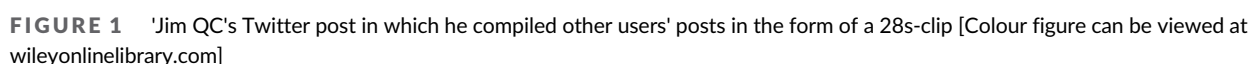
In our first illustration, Walkers Crisps (a UK brand owned by Pepsi) used the retired English footballer and TV presenter Gary Lineker to invite consumers to upload and share their selfies (pictures they take of themselves, usually on a mobile phone) on Twitter using #WalkersWave hashtag, with the winner getting tickets to the football Champion's League final in Cardiff. Walkers Crisps planned to have Gary Lineker hold submitted user photos on a

video clip that would be automatically tweeted from the brand's official account with the #WalkersWave hashtag. However, instead of sending selfies as requested, some customers sent over photos of known convicted criminals—often former celebrities—who have received significant media coverage, like Jimmy Savile, Harold Shipman, Fred West, Rolf Harris, Chris Benoit (Roderick, 2017).

“Jim QC” started the game by compiling a series of mischievous posts from users into a 28 s clip to playfully mock the team behind Walkers Crisps' brand communication idea (Figures 1 and 2).

They ended it with: “#WalkersWave We shall never forget”, a reference to World War I Remembrance Day, to imply a conflict between consumers and marketers and to remind the marketers that it was a day to remember. After this playful post, another user immediately joined in. The mischievousness snowballed and created a larger space where users started posting pictures of disgraced celebrities and politicians; Twitter users transformed the organised Walkers





**FIGURE 2** Screenshots of the above 'Jim QC's 28s-clip with Gary Lineker's voice over [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

Crisps communication strategy into an opportunity to mock marketers.

This GIF is another example (see Figure 3).

Caillois identifies Mimicry as a form of play involving roleplay, copying, and performing scripts as a way to explore and experience others and escape defined subject positions, and people exhibit it in combination with Paidia. Mimicry gives players a second reality to make-believe by manifesting different roles that are not marketplace subjects (and are actually shunned by marketers). In the above post by “Danny Akrigg”, she/he further took on the role of the social media marketers by creating this GIF, bringing marketers who usually remain in the background into the performance of their campaign.

When consumers are invited to join brands' UGC campaigns, they are aware of the availability of a “second reality or of a free unreality” (Caillois, 1961, p. 23) in which they may playfully hijack brands messages. In playing with Walkers Crisps' call, consumers have a chance to show their “illusory character”, to “make others believe that he is someone rather than himself” (Caillois, 1961, p. 32) “Danny Akrigg” utilised the awkward-looking facial expression of Steve Carell in “The Office” (an American comedy series) together with the caption “we are screwed” to ridicule the marketing team behind the campaign. This hashtag hijack was therefore turned against marketers, but not consciously against the brand itself. Users had fun at brands' expense, but the mischief was directed towards the marketing vehicle rather than the brand.

In the #QantasLuxury campaign, our second illustration, customers were asked: “What is your dream luxury inflight experience? Answers must include #QantasLuxury” to win packs of first-class

amenities (Pyjamas and a “luxury amenity kit” from this well-known Australian long-distance airline). Qantas expected consumers to share their expectations and, in turn, created a campaign around the existing amenities in their flight. However, when the campaign went online, Qantas faced well-publicised media criticism over failed negotiations with the Transport Workers Union and other employee unions in Australia. Within moments of the campaign going online, users posted a series of jokes and images suggesting everything but the experience of luxury on Qantas flights. Although this may seem like brand activism at first, they further started sneering at the social media managers behind it. The “Hitler parody” (from the movie *Downfall*) was then used as a parody clip to poke fun at Qantas' marketing team (Figures 4 and 5).

In this parody, Hitler is compared with the CEO of Qantas Airways, again implying marketplace conflict and even the totalitarian power that large corporations assume they have, with the campaign being hijacked to open up space for critique of marketing practice. The clip was a parody of the post-launch campaign meeting in which the social media team and/or marketing team were being questioned by the CEO Hitler after #QantasLuxury was hijacked. Twitter users wittily played the role of a copywriter and video editor to re-write captions of this parody to depreciate the campaign. The parody clip ridiculously yet perfectly summed up all of what Twitter users wanted to tweet in response to #QantasLuxury. According to a report by Wood (2011), Australians on Twitter were sending out 51 tweets/min, and the majority of which is making fun of the campaign and the company. This UGC hashtag campaign was turned into a playground for Twitterers, with a storm of mischievous tweets. Mimicry provided



**danny akrigg** @dannyakylfc · May 26, 2017

The walkers social media team right now #Walkerswave

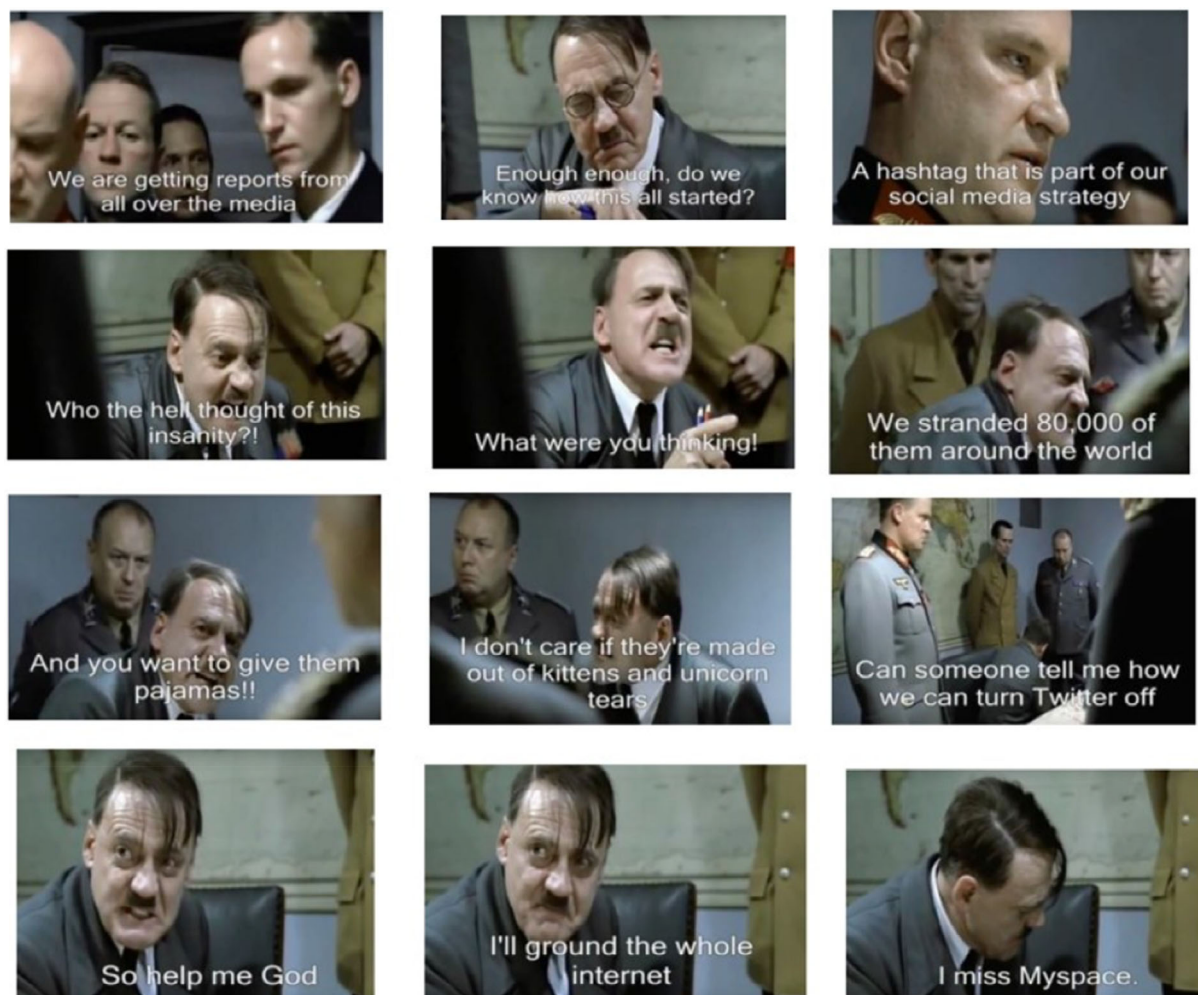


**FIGURE 3** 'Danny Akrigg's post in the form of a GIF [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]





**FIGURE 4** 'Phukkan's post in the form of a parody clip [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



**FIGURE 5** Screenshots of the above 'Phukkan's parody clip with key characters' voice over [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

a space for consumers to play with a UGC hashtag campaign by taking on the roles of different marketing practitioners specifically so they could be ridiculed. Although this contributed to the sabotage of this UGC# campaign, the emphasis was against marketing more than the brand itself.

These examples illustrate *Paidia* play, where the UGC campaigns have provided a platform for consumers to express their ideas about marketing without oversight or control, at least for a short period, that is, they are tactics of the weak, used in response to the power of corporate marketing efforts. Unlike brand activism, they were not orchestrated by a specific authority to deliberately attack the brands (who are merely collateral damage in such play). Instead, these UGC campaigns looked more like an unpremeditated playing field that consumers were invited to. From the first glance, the hashtag hijacks might look like an onslaught against brands since brands seem to be the subject of an endless stream of mocking parodies, memes, GIFs, and this could be easily misconstrued as a brand protest. However, closer scrutiny revealed that social media users were actually defying marketing campaigns; brands happened to invite users into this inevitable mischief, a perfect exposition of *Paidia* play.

### 3.2 | *Paidia* and power

There is an imbalance of power between consumers and those who manage and coordinate brands, resulting in consumers experiencing online marketing as antagonistic, authoritative, and manipulative. In this context, they grasp opportunities to transgress those rules imposed on them. In doing so, consumers can recapture power (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Thompson, 2004), albeit momentarily, by navigating through networks of power “within the enemy’s field of vision” (De Certeau, 1984, p. 37) to subvert marketing practice.

The playful hijacking of UGC campaigns does not end with mocking marketing professionals but extends to celebratory “*schadenfreude*” as they revel in the pleasure of corporations’ marketing campaigns’ failure. The below post from “Tall&Firey” is a typical example (Figure 6).

“Tall&Firey” took and expressed pleasure in seeing the failure of Walkers UGC campaign, having witnessed a stream of mischievous posts that play with #WalkersWave. Although their post might look

like an attack on the brand Walkers Crisps, the second part of the tweet, “love it when marketing backfires”, revealed that satisfaction results from the defiance of the rules of engagement set out by the marketing team of Walkers. In this case, marketing practice was under attack. Irrespective of the brand, a stage was set by the marketing team that allowed the consumers to play mischief when they were invited to co-create. In such cases, there is no specific activism agenda against the brand (Walkers Crisps) but an opportunity to resist the marketing team’s will, which is considered a powerful adversary. Unlike Qantas, Walkers did not have any collective dislike against them. They were collateral damage.

The playful wit and unconcealed contempt for corporations’ marketing practices that social media users disparaged can also be seen in another (Figure 7).

This Twitter user was again not against any specific brands. By explicitly pointing out “corporations Twitter marketing”, they specifically indicated an aversion to corporate marketing and its power over consumers. UGC campaigns worked as tools for consumers to resist corporations’ marketing practices, and they used *paidia* play as a method to impose power on the corporations. Brands are damaged inadvertently. Consumers mischief can also be seen in this below post (Figure 8).

There is *epicaricacy* that corporations marketing backfires in “Serpent” post. They spread the mischief to friends and/or followers on Twitter by saying, “see #qantasluxury for the LOLs...”. Then in its second half: “naive handling of social media by a large company”, the post mocks the marketing teams of large corporations. This prankish post used the #QantasLuxury as a means for gratification, followed by the playful prank against corporates’ marketing practice. The playful resistance is again against the marketing team, not the brand.

Across users’ mischievous posts in different hijacked UGC# campaigns, it is evident that playful resistance is opened up in communication between users on Twitter when they engage with UGC# campaigns. Once hijacked in these hashtags, marketers have no turning back but apologising to consumers. Content propagated or retweeted by users scale up to mass levels within hours and are then captured and spread by multiple media channels. Marketers are disempowered and resort to apologising for the debacle of the campaigns. But mischievous players take this further to tease and



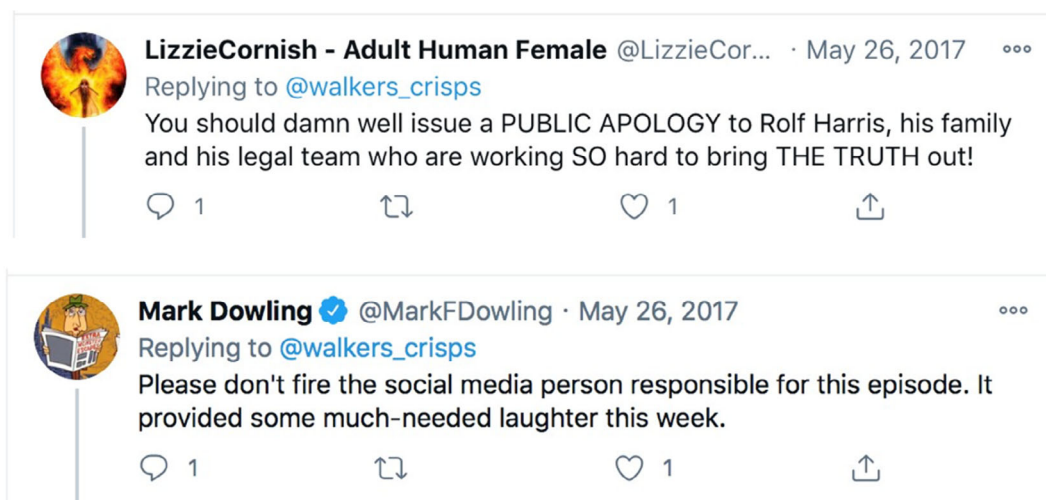
**FIGURE 6** Tall & Firey's post [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



**FIGURE 7** 'Matilda Long's post  
[Colour figure can be viewed at  
wileyonlinelibrary.com]



**FIGURE 8** 'Public Serpent's post  
[Colour figure can be viewed at  
wileyonlinelibrary.com]



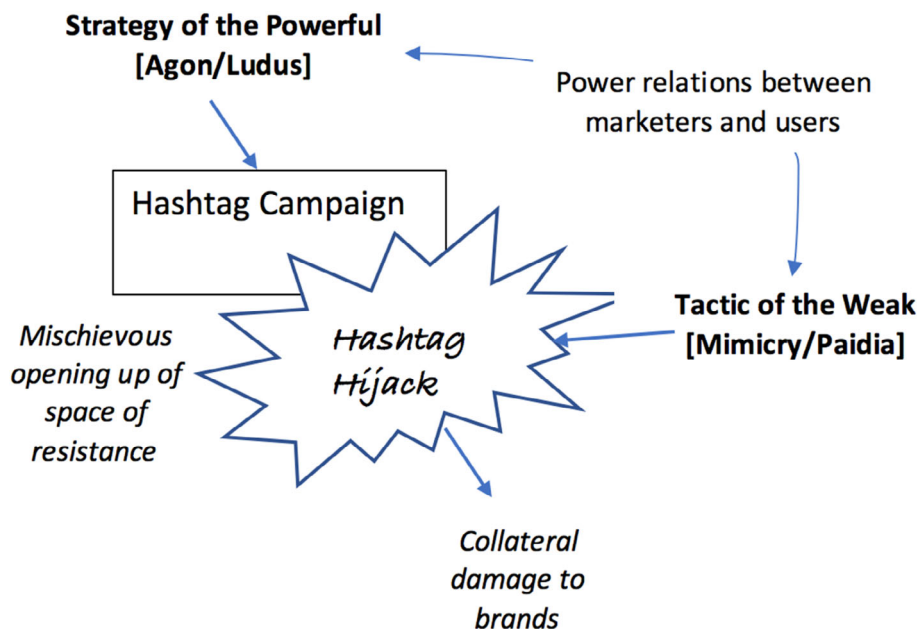
**FIGURE 9** (a,b) Mischievous Twitter users kept on playing even after Walkers apologised [Colour figure can be viewed at  
wileyonlinelibrary.com]

satire marketers repeatedly and ruthlessly. The below example shows consumers' playful response to (Bell, 2021) (Figure 9a,b)

Users enjoy sharing the joke and this act, in its turn, creates a temporary bond between fellow players. According to O'Sullivan and

Shankar (2019), play creates a sense of community among the players who have a common goal of deriding the marketing practice. Usually, marketing teams and brands have the upper hand, but in this short time and space, consumers may overpower the former in a festival of

**FIGURE 10** Consumer mischief as playful resistance to marketing in Twitter hashtag hijacking [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



inversion: a temporally bounded space where the weak seem powerful and the powerful appear weak, even as those power relations, governed as they are by the platform and its advertising imperative, inevitably soon return to normal.

Paidia play might look like a spontaneous outburst against the brands. However, a closer look reveals that it can be a way to gain power by the consumers over corporate marketing practices, containing them within their rightful place of sponsored advertising messages, and resisting their invasion of online cultures of posting, sharing and community building. Users make it clear that Hashtags are not in the service of marketers. We explain this through the cultural power model as explicated by Denegri-Knott et al. (2006). When consumers are invited to join in the UGC hashtag campaigns instigated by marketers, they take the opportunity to creatively adapt and playfully manipulate brands' intended meanings and marketing communication messages (Penz, 2007; Ndlela, 2015, p. 86). In this context, play is one of the varieties of consumer behaviour (Holt, 1995) that can be seen as a form of resistance. Consumers knew exactly what marketers wanted them to do in these campaigns, but they did something else to mischievously resist. No matter how ephemeral this power is, the hashtag hijack created a playground for consumers to undermine the power of marketing practice temporarily.

## 4 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

By uniting the sociology of play by Caillois (1961) and the cultural power model (Denegri-Knott et al., 2006), we conceptualise consumers' mischief in these hashtag hijacks as a playful resistance to marketing's power (see Figure 10).

We contribute to the existing literature on consumer resistance by highlighting play as a form of resistance against online marketing practices. Unlike Molesworth and Denegri-Knott (2008), who argue

that commercial pressures corrupt the playful potential of online platforms, we, therefore, argue that mischievous play also has the potential to a corrupt commercial interest in online activities. Marketers' attempt to manipulate consumers through the organisation of Twitter as a marketing communications space. Social media platforms allow marketing messages to be propagated by brands and amplified through paid promotions. However, in playfully responding to brands' UGC campaigns, consumers achieve a transient power. Brands are not the target of this mischievous behaviour. Instead, they coincidentally serve as an instrument for consumers' mischief.

Previous studies have shown consumers' enthusiasm when engaging with online marketing campaigns (Mirbagheri & Najmi, 2019; Poch & Martin, 2014; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2014). However, our observation of a playful side to engagement suggests that the rationalisation and instrumentalisation of brand engagement (the conscious use of social media to advocate for brands or to organise activism against them) seen in prior studies does not fully capture all motivations behind consumers' engagement with online campaigns. While existing studies of hashtag hijacks conceptualise organised forms of resistance or protest (Jackson & Welles, 2015; Sanderson et al., 2016), we suggest that resistance may also be playful. We further note that while Pegoraro et al. (2014); Wan et al. (2015) have suggested that activism is directed towards brands, consumers' playful resistance may alternatively be directed at marketing practice itself. This suggests both a savviness in consumers who understand how brand marketing works and a willingness to play with those marketing techniques, using them as a resource for an activity that is satisfying because consumers can undermine the process of marketing itself when it is felt to intrude on the everyday life of social media use.

Hashtag hijacks are, therefore, a demonstration of what we might call playful consumer mischief. Play has been used to examine various facets of consumers' behaviour, from playful escapism (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Holt, 1995; Kozinets, 2001) to emerging forms of



marketplace cultures (Kjeldgaard & Bode, 2017; Molesworth & Denegri-Knott, 2008; O'Sullivan et al., 2011). Our understanding of mischief is closer to Mikkonen and Bajde (2013) that establishes parody as a form of resistance in which subversive effects are disguised in its own silliness and nothingness. We theorise consumer mischief as a similar form of play, and our findings highlight its inevitability when brands' messages are offered to creative and critically engaged Internet users.

In working with social media owners, marketers set explicit rules for consumers to follow in competitions designed with brand purpose, as something like what Caillois (1961) referred to as *Ludus* and *Agon* (rule-bound and competitive forms of play), or what De Certeau (1984) described as a strategy of the powerful, in this case, to maintain consumers' focus on brands. But in consumers' role-playing, we see a malleability of such rules. Mischief relates to uncontrolled and spontaneous play. When consumers playfully participated in the hijack of UGC hashtag campaigns and posted prankish tweets, their mischief represents *Paidia*, or what Caillois (1961, p. 13) suggested as "free improvisation, and carefree gaiety", often in the form of *Mimicry*. With the ascendancy of UGC, consumers may now find tactics, in De Certeau's (1984) terms, to create a space that temporality resists the power of corporate marketing, and so the positive outcome for brands.

When playing to outwit UGC campaigns, consumers declare an ownership of their user-generated spaces as an explicit reminder to marketers of the limits of their power and the boundaries they are not supposed to cross. Otherwise, they may be humiliated. These overt and episodic displays of mischief tell marketers that some power remains in the consumer-marketer relationship. Hashtag hijacks may therefore discipline marketers, urging them to listen to consumers, not impinge on inappropriate times and spaces, and even play along with consumers (rather than attempt to manage them).

The implication is that although social media channels might seem to offer brands a myriad of opportunities to engage with consumers, they also conceal hidden power dynamics that can be troubling for marketers. Marketers no longer have exclusive control of their messages as social media has facilitated the freedom to create content among diversified Internet users (Berthon et al., 2008). Our study elucidates how online consumers used *Paidia* play to engage in mischievous acts against marketing messages. Control of online social media campaigns can be easily hijacked by consumers who can embody and disembody various roles to subvert the games set by brands. Content co-creation in the context of two-way communication under the call of brands poses a threat, as it is outside marketers' immediate control.

Since there is a desire to play among consumers, brand owners will inevitably encounter these behaviours online, and although directed at marketing itself, brand reputation is a collateral casualty. So how might brands respond? Certain brands have used "banter" to play along with consumers as an effective approach to engage with consumers' play. If brands have the agility and wit to embrace this festival of inversion where consumers are temporarily sovereign, then leaning into this

mischief can allow them to regain power. Further research can be undertaken to identify precisely how brands might best respond to these mischievous mass attacks on the marketing practice.

Finally, our research is limited to a single social media platform (Twitter). Consumers in other platforms might react differently, and with new forms of play, so it is crucial to understand how the structure of each forum influences consumer mischief. Caillois's sociology derived from play, along with its relationship to power (especially via De Certeau, 1984), provides a framework that allows a such an examination of playful resistance to marketing.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This manuscript's data were taken from two social media campaigns under the hashtags #walkerswave and #qantasluxury, below are the links to these two hashtags: [https://twitter.com/search?q=%23walkerswave&src=typed\\_query](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23walkerswave&src=typed_query). [https://twitter.com/search?q=%23qantasluxury&src=typed\\_query](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23qantasluxury&src=typed_query). Data presented in the manuscript is in the form of Twitter posts, captured in nine figures with accessible links provided below:

Figure 1: Link to 'Jim QC's Twitter post in which he compiled other users' posts in the form of a 28s-clip. [https://twitter.com/Jim\\_Watford/status/867802582638612481](https://twitter.com/Jim_Watford/status/867802582638612481).

Figure 3: Link to 'Danny Akrigg's post in the form of a GIF. <https://twitter.com/dannyakylfc/status/867807952492785664>.

Figure 4: 'Phukkan's post in the form of a parody clip. <https://twitter.com/Phukkan/status/138905241973293056>.

Figure 6: Link to 'Tall & Firey's post. <https://twitter.com/TallAndFirey/status/867797864776437760>.

Figure 7: Link to 'Matilda Long's post. [https://twitter.com/tilda\\_long/status/867763248044683264](https://twitter.com/tilda_long/status/867763248044683264).

Figure 8: Link to 'Public Serpent's post. <https://twitter.com/OzSerpent/status/159155002068307969>.

Figure 9a,b: [https://twitter.com/Howard\\_Adderly/status/867799247004905472](https://twitter.com/Howard_Adderly/status/867799247004905472). <https://twitter.com/MarkFDowling/status/867840960868360192>.

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