

Impacts of Post-Truth Conditions on a Susceptible Market: The Case of Nicotine Vaping

by

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Abstract

The post-truth era is characterized by widespread mistrust, competing truth claims, and polarization that impact some markets to a greater degree than others. This study introduces the concept of post-truth markets as those which are highly susceptible to being impacted by post-truth conditions. Three research questions guide this study: Why are some markets susceptible to the impacts of post-truth conditions? What is the impact of post-truth conditions on susceptible markets? And, how do consumers navigate post-truth markets? Taking the nicotine vaping market as an exemplar of post-truth markets, this study uses critical discourse analysis to examine qualitative data, including archival data (legal, news media, industry, and advocacy texts), in-depth interviews with consumers and advocates, and observational data. The theoretical insights generated indicate that markets affected by historical stigma, restrictive authority interventions, and changing expert opinions are susceptible to becoming post-truth markets. Further, the data analysis suggests that post-truth conditions lead to contestation in such markets, including moral contestation which has been noted in prior literature, and epistemic contestation which this study introduces. Consumers develop various strategies based on a post-truth subjectivity to navigate post-truth markets, including alternate truth-seeking (through relational and embodied knowledge), entrepreneurship, and activism. This research introduces several new concepts to consumer research, including the concepts of post-truth markets, post-truth subjectivity, and epistemic contestation. The findings also contribute to the growing literatures on marketplace contestation, activism, stigma, and the role of emotions in consumption. Finally, the findings have implications for various stakeholders in the nicotine vaping market, as well as other post-truth markets.

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Introduction

“I don't really trust anyone - I feel like everything is just so confusing and like I said, there's so much information where it's just, I don't know. I don't know anything about anything, if that makes sense. I know how I feel when I vape, I know I feel better than I did smoking, so I don't really see how vaping is worse than smoking.” (Sybil, former smoker and current vape consumer)

The opening quote comes from an interview with Sybil, a young woman who was able to stop smoking with the use of nicotine vapes. Her statement captures the contemporary global zeitgeist of widespread mistrust and competing truth claims, which consumers and other market actors must continually navigate in the post-truth era. A growing mistrust in authoritative institutions has been reported in recent years across the globe, from the spread of anti-state *Wahhabism* at the turn of the 20th century (Asad, 2003; Mahmood, 2006) to anti-science Western populism of the 2010s (Lewandowsky, Oberauer, Gignac, 2013; Iyengar & Massey, 2019). The proliferation of digital platforms both for the production and consumption of information has enabled not only the democratization of knowledge, but also the dilution of authority that was once enjoyed by traditional knowledge authorities, such as news media and governments.

Widespread mistrust of information from news media, governments, and other traditional knowledge authorities culminated in crises of public health non-compliance during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating the consequences of fragmented knowledge production in contemporary society (Kozinets, Gershoff, Barnett White, 2020). These discourses also reflect a broader culture of suspicion towards authorities, which has characterized the Western political atmosphere in recent years, and which scholars have called “a post-truth, post-news, President Trump, Twitter-world” (Ott, 2017). The term *post-truth* was chosen by the Oxford English

Dictionary in 2016 as ‘word of the year,’ and refers to a periodizing concept that “emphasizes discord, confusion, polarized views and understanding, well- and misinformed competing convictions, and elite attempts to produce and manage these “truth markets” or competitions” (Harsin, 2018a, p. 3). In the post-truth era, authoritative knowledge sources that were once trusted to provide factual information no longer command trust from consumers and other market actors.

This study is positioned at the intersection of literatures on marketplace activism (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Handelman & Fischer, 2018) and market contestation (Humphreys, 2010; Mimoun, Trujillo-Torres, Sobande, 2022; Huff, Humphreys, Wilner, 2021; Valor, Lloveras, Papaoikonomou, 2021). While a number of studies have examined the trajectories of contested markets, where market growth “faces strong regulatory, normative, and cultural opposition” (Huff et al., 2021, p. 49), there has been limited acknowledgement to date of the possible intersection between post-truth conditions and market contestation. Recent studies suggest that market contestation is characterized by discursive struggles between oppositional market actors (Mars, Schau, Thorp, 2023; Mimoun et al., 2022; Valor et al., 2021). Actors in contested markets use various strategies to undermine their opponents’ views, including emotional appeals (Mimoun et al., 2022; Valor et al., 2021), mythic symbolism (Humphreys & Thompson, 2014; Zhao & Belk, 2012), and semantic categorization (Humphreys, 2010).

The strategies employed by market actors in a contested market echo those reported in studies of marketplace activism. Research on the concept of marketplace activism has largely focused on consumer activism (Handelman & Fischer, 2018) and liberal movements advocating for ‘progressive’ outcomes (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Thompson & Arsel, 2004). Yet, the past two decades have seen increasing sociopolitical

polarization across the globe, with advocacy efforts extending to non-consumer market actors, and some advocacy emerging from ‘illiberal’ rather than progressive factions (Ulver, 2021). As such, market contestation could involve activism-type behaviour from a wider selection of market actors, such as industry lobbyists, charities, and retailers, and for purposes other than the improvement of society.

Building on the periodizing concept of the post-truth era (Harsin, 2015, 2018a, 2018b; Ott, 2017), this work explores three questions: **First, why are some markets particularly susceptible to being impacted by post-truth conditions than others? Second, how are susceptible markets impacted by post-truth conditions? Third, how do consumers navigate markets impacted by post-truth conditions?** To answer these questions and develop theoretical insights, I conducted a qualitative study of the nicotine vaping market in Canada. I propose the concept of *post-truth markets* to describe markets that are highly susceptible to post-truth conditions. The findings presented here offer insights into the characteristics of post-truth markets, the impact of post-truth conditions on such markets, and how consumers navigate post-truth markets.

This dissertation begins with an overview of the extant literature on post-truth conditions, contested markets, and marketplace activism. Next, I present a theoretical overview of the post-truth era, its conditions, and its practices. Then, I provide a historical overview of nicotine vaping and describe the data collection and analysis processes. Next, I present the findings to address the three guiding research questions. The findings contribute to a framework for understanding the characteristics of post-truth markets and contemporary actor subjectivity in the post-truth era. Finally, the discussion explores implications of this work for broader consumer research, with contributions to market contestation, marketplace stigma, marketplace emotions,

and marketplace activism. Implications are also offered for stakeholders including policymakers, marketers, and advocates in a post-truth market.

Literature Review

1 Brief Overview of Post-Truth Conditions

In the past two decades, few markets have escaped controversy with public sentiments and marketing practices shifting rapidly alongside sociopolitical conditions (Mimoun et al., 2022; Valor et al., 2021). The periodizing concept of a post-truth era suggests that all markets existing within this timeframe will be affected, to some degree, by post-truth conditions. However, the outcomes of post-truth conditions, such as “discord, confusion, polarized views, and understanding, ill- and misinformed competing convictions, and elite attempts to produce and manage these ‘truth markets’” (Harsin, 2018a, p. 3), are arguably likely to play a more significant role in certain markets than in others.

Three sociopolitical conditions broadly characterize the post-truth era. The first is widespread social mistrust (Bunker, 2020; Harsin, 2016, 2018a, 2018b; Ott, 2017) that causes suspicion among consumers and other market actors, in tandem with growing mistrust in knowledge authorities such as governments, experts, and news media. Second, competing truth claims are a condition of the post-truth era (Harsin, 2018a, 2018b; Lee & Hosam, 2020) that can be seen in the increase of ‘fake news’ claims and alternative truth media. Third, polarization and the growing tendency towards dualism in opinion towards social and political issues is another characteristic of the post-truth era (Bulut & Yörük, 2017; Harsin, 2018a, 2018b). These three conditions characterizing the post-truth era have been attributed to political rhetoric emerging in the early 2000s with a peak during the 2016 US presidential election, which normalized discourses that undermined traditional knowledge institutions, such as scientific experts and reputable news media outlets (Harsin, 2018a). Post-truth conditions have also been attributed to the ecology of social media (Ott, 2017), which readily provides a platform to any self-declared

truth-teller, and to changes in journalism, such as the introduction of ‘citizen journalism’ (Harsin, 2015). Johnson and Wiedenbeck (2009, p. 333) define citizen journalism as “news content produced by ordinary citizens with no formal journalism training.”

1.1 Impact of Post-Truth Conditions on Markets

Post-truth conditions have impacted society at large by creating a cultural and political environment where controversies abound and lead not to productive public dialogue, but to increasing mistrust, disinformation, and polarization. Likewise, post-truth conditions have impacted markets by shaping and reinforcing certain marketing practices that contribute to social conflict (Ulver, 2021). The impact of post-truth conditions on markets has received limited acknowledgement in consumer research however, with a couple of notable exceptions (Kozinets et al., 2020, Ulver, 2021) that I will discuss in this section. Here, I will also provide an overview of the consumer literature that has noted the impact of any of the three post-truth conditions - mistrust, competing truth claims, and polarization - although there is no explicit association between those works and post-truth theorizing.

1.1.1 Mistrust

A growing lack of trust is a key condition of the post-truth era (Harsin, 2018a), both among members of society towards each other, and among consumers and other market actors towards traditional knowledge institutions like governments and experts (Harsin, 2018b). Consumer trust in experts can be lost, and gained back, after a public crisis such as that described by Humphreys and Thompson (2014) after the BP Macondo explosion and oil spill in 2010. This can be considered a normal cause-and-effect phenomenon of mistrust due to a precipitating event. On the other hand, mistrust as a post-truth condition requires no precipitating event or particular crisis in order to exist; rather, it is a condition that developed slowly over the past two

decades that witnessed both social media growth and shifts in political rhetoric towards fostering doubt. It is similar to the mistrust that Thompson (2013) reports in his study of alternative medicine consumers, who mistrust biomedicine, a powerful institution, due to a general suspicion of hegemonic Western knowledge rather than due to some precipitating event. This generalized suspicion is aligned with the growing social mistrust of the post-truth era. The decline in social trust towards others, and particularly traditional knowledge holders, is noted by Kozinets and colleagues (2020, p. 130), who argue that “[t]he post-truth interventions of politicians and corporations have combined with the commonplace telling of lies in everyday life to create a post-trust society, one in which everyday lying has festered into a cultural miasma of mistrust, doubt, and skepticism.” Kozinets et al. (2020) argue that consumers continue to trust certain corporations even after brand crises or public controversies that would appear to blacklist these corporations permanently. They give the example of Samsung, a company that faced scandal and airline bans in 2016 after millions of phones it produced overheated and exploded spontaneously, yet that by 2020 the brand faced renewed consumer demand simply due to the passage of time (Kozinets et al., 2020). This raises the question: under what conditions does mistrust, as a post-truth condition, actually impact consumers’ responses to a market? Especially after the onset of controversy affecting a brand or an industry, it appears that consumers continue to grow suspicious in some cases yet quickly move on from the crisis in others (Kozinets et al. 2020). My first research question therefore concerns the conditions under which markets become susceptible to the influence of post-truth conditions, including widespread mistrust. The findings of this study thus contribute to our understanding of when markets are likely to suffer from mistrust among consumers and other market actors.

1.1.2 Competing Truth claims

The notion of competing truth claims is that of competition among market actors to establish not only what is true and real, but also to frame opposing actors as mistaken at best, or dishonest at worst. This is a post-truth condition whereby actors compete for the production and targeting of narratives of truth, yet the multiplicity of truth-telling efforts leads to the fragmentation of a market. Although competing truth claims have not been explicitly noted in prior consumer literature, recent studies suggest that discursive struggles between oppositional market actors are increasingly playing a role in market processes such as legitimization (Mimoun et al., 2022; Valor et al., 2021) and contestation (Humphreys et al., 2016; Huff et al., 2021). In markets with competing agendas, market actors use various strategies to undermine their opponents' views, including emotional appeals (Mimoun et al., 2022; Valor et al., 2021), mythic symbolism (Humphreys & Thompson, 2014; Zhao & Belk, 2012), and semantic categorization (Humphreys, 2010). These strategies aim to challenge established market actors and to challenge the status quo in a particular market (Humphreys et al., 2016). These strategies are similar to, but not exactly the same as, circulating competing truth claims. For example, emotional appeals (Mimoun et al., 2022; Valor et al., 2021) focus on fostering public support by evoking powerful emotions, rather than on asserting truth claims and denouncing alternative truth claims. Similarly, mythic symbolism (Humphreys & Thompson, 2014; Zhao & Belk, 2012) allows the framing of new ideas and practices within familiar mythic structures, such as heroic myths, rather than asserting a truth claim or denouncing opposing claims. Semantic categorization (Humphreys, 2010) involves the manipulation of language to lend disruptive messages ideological power, which is one way of making claims appear truthful, yet does not involve undermining the truth claims of opponents. Disruption here refers to new entrants to a market challenging incumbent market actors (Humphreys, 2010). While these examples of disruptive

strategies are certainly effective at garnering public support for the disruptors, and undermining the views or practices of opponents, they are not strategies of asserting that one's claims are more 'real' or factual than one's opponents. These studies demonstrate that strategic actors have managed to disrupt markets by offering evocative messages that attack or undermine their opponents, but do not consider how such actors challenge the very notion of 'truth' and achieve the disruption of a market by offering competing portrayals of reality. In answering the second and third research questions guiding this study, the findings illustrate how opposing market actors compete over epistemic authority in a market impacted by post-truth conditions.

1.1.3 Polarization

The concept of polarization has been noted in many studies of contemporary market processes such as legitimization (Humphreys, 2010; Mimoun et al., 2022; Huff et al., 2021), delegitimization (Valor et al., 2021), consumer exclusion (Crockett & Wallendorf, 2004; Crockett, 2022), surveillance capitalism (Darmody & Zwick, 2020), and marketplace activism (Gopaldas, 2014; Holt, 2002; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Ulver, 2021). In their study of the role of emotional discourse in legitimizing a market, Mimoun and colleagues (2021, p. 2) describe a strategy of polarizing emotions where news media "counterpose two antagonistic feeling rules that coexist as moral batteries and create two equal power emotional extremes that market actors are motivated to defend." This highlights the role of traditional knowledge institutions, such as news media, in perpetuating polarized public opinions on social and political topics. Corporate and business actors are also implicated by Ulver (2021, p. 2) in practices that contribute to a polarized society, an outcome of a sociohistorical process she considers "an ongoing transnational polarization dividing the public into ideologically oppositional and uncompromising groups." Yet, news media and corporations are not the only market actors who

contribute to social and political polarization. In fact, polarization as a post-truth condition shapes a particular subjectivity that positions all market actors within an increasingly polarized society, where polarized views shape the behaviours of market actors and are thus further reinforced. For example, polarization can be reinforced by the actions and discourses of consumer activists (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004), not-for-profit organizations (Valor et al., 2021), and/or government regulations (Darmody & Zwick, 2020). As such, prior studies demonstrate that social and political polarization affects market processes, and that various market actors can further reinforce polarization, yet they stop short of explaining how the dynamic interplay between multiple market actors is both shaped by a polarized society and contributes to polarization within an affected market. This study considers polarization as a condition of the post-truth era, which influences the subjectivity of all market actors. The findings regarding the impact of post-truth conditions on affected markets outline how polarization shapes the discourses of opposing market actors and impacts the growth of the concerned market.

2 Contestation and Conflict

The above section demonstrates how post-truth conditions have been noted in prior consumer research, with a substantial number of these studies contributing to the research topic of market contestation. In this section, I will provide an overview of prior studies on market contestation as they relate to the current work.

Contested markets are described in several ways in prior consumer research. Humphreys and colleagues (2017, p. 614) describe contested markets as existing, established markets that “can be subject to destabilization from new entrants who are seen as challengers, and by social movements and social activists.” This definition of a contested market does not quite capture the

type of contestation that occurs when post-truth conditions influence a market because this definition focuses on established markets being threatened by new actors who had not previously been involved in the market. As seen in the vaping context, a market can experience pushback early in its emergence, and this pushback can be sustained by the mistrust and polarization between existing market actors, rather than be caused by new entrants. Debenedetti, Philippe, Chaney, and Humphreys (2021, p. 334) further suggest that “when contested, mature markets in particular become the subject of a struggle between actors who want to introduce new issues into the field and incumbents who seek to defend and maintain their legitimacy.” This conceptualization indicates that market contestation can be the result of a clash between the concerns of new market actors and the interests of established actors. This raises the question of how contestation occurs in a market due to continuous disagreements between established actors, without the interference of new market actors.

Humphreys and colleagues’ (2017) definition of a contested market highlights the role of social movements and social activists in contesting an established market. Social activism typically emerges over perceived moral or ethical concerns about a particular market, and this certainly resonates with the type of destabilization caused by post-truth conditions. Moral contestation also has been noted by other studies of contested markets. For instance, Coskuner-Balli, Pehlivan, and Üçok Hughes (2021, p. 663) define a contested market “as one where the legal, cultural, and moral legitimacy of the plural logics are in flux and in tension and where market actors try to shape the market via adopting series of institutional work.” This definition situates contestation as a dynamic process between the market and its “context of context” (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011), namely the norms of the social environment within which it is situated. Similarly, Huff and colleagues (2021, p. 49) define a contested market as one where the

market's growth "faces strong regulatory, normative, and cultural opposition." The authors build this definition of market contestation as a mirror image of market legitimation, which they (Huff et al., 2021 p. 24) define as "a social process in which market actors engage in an ongoing negotiation of a market's legal, normative, and conceptual boundaries." Again, contestation here is conceptualized as push-back against a market's growth from the social environment that shapes the market (Huff et al., 2021). The categories of legal/regulatory, moral/normative, and cultural opposition referenced by Coskuner-Balli and colleagues (2021) and Huff and colleagues (2021) suggest that contestation is likely to be based on social objections against markets that are ideologically inconsistent with hegemonic norms. Social norms are not static however, and practices that were once widely accepted are no longer acceptable, and vice versa. Accordingly, some markets have enjoyed social market legitimacy that was later challenged through moral contestation (Thompson, 2004; Valor et al., 2021), while others gained market legitimacy after a history of moral contestation (Humphreys, 2010; Mimoun et al., 2022). For example, Mimoun and colleagues' (2022) study of the fertility technology market demonstrates how a previously morally contested market can become legitimized through emotion discourse used by news media. Similarly, Valor and colleagues (2021) demonstrate how the previously accepted bullfighting market became delegitimized through moral contestation by news media and social activists. Both studies show how moral contestation reflects changes in hegemonic moral values, whether in an established market (bullfighting) or an emerging one (fertility technology).

Post-truth conditions of widespread mistrust, competing truth claims, and polarization are likely to cause market contestation along the same dimensions identified by Coskuner-Balli and colleagues (2021) and Huff and colleagues (2021, p. 49), namely "regulatory, normative, and cultural" conditions. A key consequence of the post-truth era is the fragmentation of trusted,

hegemonic knowledge in society. Based on the findings of this study, I propose that market contestation may emerge due to multiple, incompatible perceptions of reality and truth. I call this *epistemic contestation* and propose that when post-truth conditions influence a susceptible market, both epistemic contestation and moral contestation are likely to arise in that market. This is a new finding that will be elaborated later in this manuscript.

In summary, previous work has examined the dynamics of market contestation as the disruption caused by new entrants to an established market (Humphreys et al., 2016; Debenedetti et al., 2021), or as a process by which social norms cause pushback against the growth of a morally contested market (Coskuner-Balli et al., 2021; Mimoun et al., 2022; Valor et al. 2021). The interplay between post-truth conditions and contemporary market contestation remains understudied, especially in the case of epistemic contestation among existing market actors. This study contributes to this literature by considering how post-truth conditions influence susceptible markets, resulting in both moral and epistemic contestation.

3 Marketplace Activism

A recent review indicates that the concept of consumer activism dominates the literature on marketplace activism (Handelman & Fischer, 2018). Handelman and Fischer (2018) suggest that the current body of research on consumer activism tends to dualize activist groups and their opponents. Furthermore, it has focused on a narrow set of ‘opponents’, like mass media and corporations, to the exclusion of other market actors like governments. Dualistic representations exist even within the emic views of consumer activists. Kozinets and Handelman (2004) studied the identity projects of consumer activists, and found their self-identity consists of two characteristics: first, a belief that they are motivated to bring about systemic, structural change against the work of powerful opponents who cause social harm, and second, a belief that

‘mainstream consumers’ are complacent ‘robots’ whose behavior must be changed. Kozinets and Handelman (2004) draw on New Social Movement (NSM) theory in their work; NSM explains social activism in terms of, among other things, the collective action frames shared by activists (Benford & Snow, 2000). Collective action frames constitute a unified view of a social problem, of who is responsible for it, and of what must be done to remedy it (Benford & Snow, 2000).

There are examples of consumer resistance where activists theoretically fit with Kozinets and Handelman’s (2004) characterization, such as Varman and Belk’s (2012) study of the anti-corporate struggle against Coca-Cola in North India. The activists in Varman and Belk’s (2012) study not only share a collective action frame rooted in nationalist ideology, but also adhere to Kozinets and Handelman’s (2004) characterization of activists as those who use public campaigning and efforts to change mainstream consumption for the purpose of bringing about lasting, systemic change, in this case, the elimination of large corporations that are considered exploitative and environmentally harmful. Another study where consumer activists view themselves similarly to Kozinets and Handelman’s (2004) characterization is Thompson’s (2004) study of consumers in the natural health field. In direct resistance to the ideology of biomedicine and its values rooted explicitly in the Gnostic mythos, Thompson’s (2004) participants adhere to an ideological counter-stance that evokes a Romantic view of health, bodies, and nature. Yet, Thompson (2004) demonstrates how the natural health consumers’ discourses of resistance are actually reflective of the same Gnostic view of science and nature that informs the very same ideology they oppose (biomedicine). Although Thompson’s (2004) participants would claim consistency with Kozinets and Handelman’s (2004) characterization of activists as those who are directly in opposition to undesirable market forces, Thompson’s (2004) findings illustrate that in the realm of ideology, discrete and binary categorization might be impossible. Hence, Thompson

(2004) warns against an oversimplified adherence to the emic portrayal of consumer activists who fight for ‘social good’ while their opponents continue ‘social harm,’ especially since ideological agendas are more complex and less discrete than they might superficially appear.

Research on the concept of marketplace activism has largely focused on organized consumer activism (Handelman & Fischer, 2018) and liberal movements advocating for ‘progressive’ outcomes (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Thompson & Arsel, 2004). Yet, the past two decades have seen increasing sociopolitical polarization across the globe, with advocacy efforts extending to non-consumer market actors, and some advocacy emerging from ‘illiberal’ rather than progressive factions (Ulver, 2021). Furthermore, post-truth conditions force market actors into polarized ideological positions, in a broader social atmosphere of widespread mistrust and proliferating, competing truth claims. This sort of environment might foster forms of marketplace activism hitherto unexamined. A market that is impacted by post-truth conditions might encourage activism-type behavior from a wider selection of market actors, such as industry lobbyists, non-profit organizations, and retailers. Moreover, activist-type behavior might be driven by purposes other than the improvement of society. This study contributes to the literature on marketplace activism by considering how advocacy voices emerge from a wide selection of market actors in the post-truth era, when there are as many different notions of social improvement (and liberal versus illiberal positions) as there are competing truth-tellers.

Theory

To understand the impact of post-truth conditions on markets and consumers, I draw on critical discourse analysis and theories of language as social power to develop a theoretical framework of post-truth markets. This section begins with a brief overview of theorizations of truth prior to the post-truth era. Then, I consider the normalization of misinformation and disinformation, and the fragmentation of knowledge production in a post-truth society (Figure 1). Finally, I discuss the theoretical underpinnings of ideology and discourse in this study.

1 Before Post-Truth, What Was ‘Truth’?

Conventional theories of knowledge in Western thought have largely considered ‘truth’ to be singular, with the belief that only one version of reality can be true, and hegemonic, in that dominant notions of truth are determined by powerful social agents. Modern philosophers of knowledge argue that the construction of trustworthy knowledge in society is tied to power, whether that power is scientific (Latour & Wolgar, 1979), socioeconomic (Marx, 1844), or religious (Feuerbach, 1841). Here, I will compare theorizations of centralized and dispersed power to produce knowledge. Centralized knowledge production was conceptualized by modernist philosophers such as Marx (1844), Feuerbach (1841), and Kant (1891), while dispersed knowledge production was conceptualized by post-modern philosophers such as Foucault (1970), Bourdieu (1981), and Kuhn (1970). This section provides useful background for understanding how these conventional theories of knowledge fall short of explaining the fragmentation of truth in the post-truth era.

In theories of centralized knowledge production, a group of people or an institution possesses the majority of the power to distinguish truth from falsehood and to generate trustworthy knowledge in society. For example, Feuerbach (1841) argues that in a society where

religious institutions possess unmatched power, truth becomes that which is generated by religious authorities and accepted by religious believers. He states that “a fact is that which from being an object of the intellect becomes a matter of conscience; a fact is that which one cannot criticize or attack without being guilty of a crime” (Feuerbach 1841, p. 203-204). Although he does not use the term ‘power,’ this quote evokes the immense power differential between the thinking human mind and the forces which construct dominant knowledge and ‘facts,’ suggesting that in such a society, facts are components of a moralistic worldview (“a matter of conscience”) that is enforced by dominant belief. Similarly, Karl Marx (1844) argues that the powerful wealthy class in a society imposes hegemonic knowledge onto unsuspecting, relatively powerless workers and consumers. Marx (1844) is credited for developing the modern concept of ideology, although his original formation of the concept is slightly different from the post-modern usage. For Marx (1844), ideology is an abstract system that imposes meanings constructed by powerful social forces onto unsuspecting, relatively powerless workers and consumers. Inherent in his notion of ideology is the belief in the existence of a metaphysical Truth, akin to Plato's idealism, which is objective and independent of human experience. Marx believed that this metaphysical Truth can be discovered by critical humans via “true consciousness.” Ideology, Marx (1844) suggests, works to alienate workers and consumers from their true consciousness, thus resulting in false consciousness that is orchestrated and maintained by the powerful social class(es). True consciousness can be accessed when ideology is overthrown and disentangled from reality by questioning that which is presented as 'fact' without explanation or logical reasoning (Marx, 1844). This is not so easy since, as Marx (1844) posits, ideology works precisely because it is invisible - it presents certain aspects of the world as natural, in order to maintain false consciousness. For both Feuerbach (1841) and Marx (1844),

knowledge is constructed by powerful, centralized social forces and accepted by less powerful members of society, who become alienated from their own ability to discern truth from falsehood due to their collective trust in these powerful knowledge authorities.

Theories of dispersed knowledge production emerged in the post-modern era, after the introduction of constructivism by Kant (1891). Constructivism is an epistemic approach which holds that all human knowledge is constructed by our senses and *a priori* categories, rather than an objective snapshot of metaphysical or 'pure' Truth. While Kant (1891) would agree with idealist philosophers that metaphysical Truth *does* exist, he did not believe that metaphysical Truth is accessible to the human mind because it is limited to empirical truth, which is always a consequence of the human senses. Hence, for Kant (1891), there are no powerful, centralized actors obscuring metaphysical Truth from the powerless because even the powerful cannot access this pure Truth. Kant's (1891) constructivism has informed a rich body of work in the twentieth century by post-modern theorists such as Kuhn (1970) and Foucault (1970; 1980). These post-Kantian theorists were less concerned with metaphysical Truth and more focused on how certain discourses of truth become dominant in a society. Kuhn's (1970) and Foucault's (1970) theories of knowledge share two commonalities: first, that discourses of truth are constructed and reinforced through language, and second, that a powerful discourse of truth will dominate society until it is replaced by an equally (or more) powerful discourse.

Kuhn's (1970) theory of scientific revolutions indicates that although knowledge is socially constructed, scientific contributions are assessed based on their fit within the dominant paradigm of the field, or what he calls 'normal science.' Paradigms are socially and historically informed, and intrinsically tied to language, so that concepts across paradigms are incommensurable (Kuhn, 1970). Science is a powerful knowledge authority especially in

contemporary Western societies (Latour & Wolgar, 1979), and Kuhn's (1970) work suggests that in society and markets, as in science, any new information must fit within the existing dominant paradigm in order to be trusted and accepted. In other words, new information cannot be accepted as fact unless it adheres to the contemporary paradigm of the scientific field, society, or market in question. The notion of paradigm captures well the conventional view of truth as singular and hegemonic, where only one knowledge framework could exist in a particular social group at a time. In the post-truth era, there is a total lack of a hegemonic knowledge framework. While in the past, new information would be dismissed or deeply investigated if it did not fit within the existing paradigm, in the post-truth era any new information is treated as plausible until proven false (Harsin, 2018a), since there is no societal consensus over a dominant knowledge paradigm.

The work of post-modern critical theorists such as Foucault (1970; 1980) also emerged from Kant's (1891) constructivism. Positioning knowledge as a product of language, Foucault (1970) suggests that knowledge cannot occur outside of discourse, so that a concept cannot be 'known' unless it can be articulated using existing language. He further suggests that *epistemes* or truth regimes, which he defines as powerful knowledge systems that dominate society at a given historical period, shape discourse. In other words, human knowledge cannot exist outside of discourse, and discourse is directly determined by truth regimes. Like other post-modern conceptions of power and truth, Foucault's notion of truth regimes is a concept of dispersed rather than centralized knowledge production. In both centralized and dispersed knowledge production, hegemonic knowledge is controlled by only a few, powerful social agents, such as religious authorities, socioeconomic groups, political actors, or scientific experts. While in centralized knowledge production, these authorities decree certain information to be

truth or fact with no public dialogue, in the case of dispersed knowledge production, every member of a society is involved in the reproduction of the dominant *episteme* (Foucault, 1970) by means of language use, common discourse, and self-policing. Foucault (1970) conceptualizes episteme as a historical and cultural phenomenon that structures meaning during a particular period of time. He (Foucault, 1970, p. 22) states that episteme “delimits in the totality of experience a field of knowledge, defines the mode of being of the objects that appear in that field, provides man's everyday perception with theoretical powers, and defines the conditions in which he can sustain a discourse about things that is recognized to be true.” Knowledge production is thus dispersed because all social actors partake in constructing and maintaining the hegemonic truth regime, which often serves to strengthen the power and control of powerful social actors, such as government authorities, journalists, lobbyists, and experts including scientists, doctors, and religious figures (Bevir, 1999). It is important to note here that while all social actors participate in reproducing knowledge, this knowledge is constrained by the parameters of the truth regime, so that all actors’ efforts culminate in reproducing and strengthening the truth regime. In the post-truth era, truth-seeking and truth-telling attempts by many social actors do not feed into a singular truth regime; instead, they lead to a rise in suspicion and mistrust, based in the belief that any information might be ‘fake news’ (Lee & Hosam, 2020). Post-modernist theories of knowledge such as the Foucauldian perspective offered insight into how individual subjectivity, as varied and unique as each person, remains constrained by a singular, hegemonic worldview that shapes discourse and thus shapes the human perception of truth and fact. In the post-truth era, there is no hegemonic truth regime to unify the varied subjective experiences of social agents (Harsin, 2018a). While some actors, authorities, and groups undoubtedly possess greater social power than others, this power is

divided among polarized figures rather than enjoyed by the traditional authorities of the past (political, religious, scientific, etc.) (Robertson & Amarasingam, 2022). As such, post-modern theories of knowledge account for societies where knowledge production is dispersed in the service of a hegemonic truth regime, but they do not account for a post-truth society where fragmented knowledge production undermines, rather than bolsters, traditionally hegemonic truth discourses (Harsin, 2018a; Stoker, 2017).

The relationship between postmodernism and post-truth is debated among theorists. For example, McIntyre (2018) argues that post-truth politics and society are the product of postmodernism. However, Harsin (2018a) disagrees. He suggests that postmodernism “emphasized the collapse of [truth] metanarratives associated with a modern period, and the proliferation of less ambitious, nontotalizing explanations and justifications for knowledge (*petits récits*).” (Harsin, 2018a, p. 4). While postmodernism rejected modernist grand theories of transcendental Truth, it celebrated the multiplicity of knowledge micro-narratives that all serve common, collective discourses. In contrast, the post-truth era lacks the collaborative connection between the micro-narratives of postmodernism, and instead is characterized by competing, contradictory truth claims that the post-truth subject faces with mistrust and suspicion (Harsin, 2018a).

Still, post-modern thought can inform post-truth theorizing, particularly post-modern insights into the role of ideology in shaping discourse, and consequently shaping knowledge production and consumption. Prior research shows that ideology plays an important role in shaping markets, whether it be political ideology (Crockett & Pendarvis, 2017), national ideology (Luedicke, Thompson, Giesler, 2010; Zhao & Belk, 2012), or neoliberal ideology (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). The influence of ideology on markets ranges from the structural level,

such as access to consumer goods (Crockett & Wallendorf, 2004) to the level of consumer subjectivities (Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Henry, 2010). Here, I consider ideology as theorized by the Hegelian philosopher Slavoj Žižek (1989), who has conceptualized ideology by challenging Marx's (1844) distinction between true and false consciousness. Žižek (1989) argues that ideology is always present in the human experience of knowledge, and that the removal of one ideology necessitates the introduction of another. Unlike Kuhn's (1971) paradigm and Foucault's (1970) episteme, Žižek's (1989) ideology does not need to be eliminated across a given society or field in order to be replaced by another. Instead, Žižek (1989) theorizes that multiple ideologies can exist at the same place and the same time. He suggests that ideology serves both a psychological and a social function of shaping the human capacity to make meaning of sensory experience, and hence ideology shapes *all* knowledge. Unlike Marx (1844), who saw ideology as a top-down project constructed by elite classes and imposed upon powerless members of society, leading to 'false knowledge' that alienates humans from their 'true consciousness,' Žižek (1989; 2016) follows in the footsteps of other constructivists by arguing that ideology is inescapable, meaning that even the powerful knowledge-producing authorities (whether the elite class, religious figures, scientists, etc.) know the world through the lens of ideology. Žižek's (2016) notion of ideology is conceptually aligned with Harsin's (2018a; 2018b) description of the role of ideology in the post-truth era:

“In PT [post-truth], the idea is not that lay citizens see the world falsely through the ideology of ruling-class thinkers, but that “popular” conceptions of reality have become confusing or suspicious because of the saturation of reality representation with games of expertly researched and thus exclusive strategic deception—of pan-partisan nature.”

(Harsin, 2018a, p.3)

The mistrust and hostility in the post-truth era is then not only from the ‘lay citizen’ towards powerful knowledge producers, but also towards all conceptions of reality that compete for an audience in the age of attention capitalism. Economists Davenport and Beck (2001, p. 1) proposed the impactful concept of the attention economy, where the priority of businesses has become not only to make profit, but more importantly “to get and hold the attention of consumers, stockholders, potential employees, and the like, and ... to parcel out their own attention in the face of overwhelming options.” Ideology in the contemporary era is not Marx’s (1844) singular agenda of the ruling class; ideology in the post-truth era is multifold, with multiple ideologies emerging and competing at the discursive level simultaneously. Building on Kant’s (1791) work, Žižek (2016) argues that ideology is the Kantian ‘a priori,’ without which humans cannot make meaning of sensory experience. According to Žižek (2016), ideology is necessary for meaning making, and so the growing need to make sense of conflicting information in the post-truth era creates demand for many, competing ideologies to emerge and grow.

For Žižek (1989), the task of science is to critically examine what ideology obscures: what he calls the ‘unknown knowns.’ While Žižek’s (1989; 2016) work does not directly speak to the post-truth era of fragmented knowledge production, it offers insights for understanding the role of ideology in a post-truth society. His argument that ideology is inescapable and precedes meaning making suggests that different social groups, possessing different levels of social power, will be influenced by (and reproduce) different ideologies even while co-existing in a single society. These ideologies could complement or compete with each other, but the relevant point here is that the existence of one does not preclude the existence of another. If ideology is not necessarily sequential, with society moving from one hegemonic ideology to another, then

there can exist multiple powerful ideologies that compete through increasingly polarized discourses. With the loss of a hegemonic ideology, the power previously enjoyed by authoritative social actors who benefitted from this ideology thus spreads and bolsters multiple, competing truth-tellers (Harsin, 2018a; Stoker, 2017).

2 Knowledge in the Post-Truth Era

I build on the work of critical communication scholar Jason Harsin (2015; 2018a), who theorizes the post-truth era as a pastiche of *regimes of post-truth*. In contrast to Foucault's (1970; 1980) concept of a hegemonic truth regime, where societal control is enacted by means of dispersed rather than centralized power, Harsin (2015, p. 4) envisions power "fragmentation, segmentation, and targeted content" within multiple, competing regimes of post-truth. In a post-truth society, therefore, power is neither centralized nor widely dispersed, but simultaneously shaped and contested by competing agendas like snags within the social fabric. Epistemology in the post-truth era is fundamentally different from that in prior periods of human society (Capilla, 2021). Theories of post-truth in critical communications studies suggest that there are two precursors that contribute to post-truth conditions in society: first, the strategic manipulation of information (Harsin, 2018a), and second, an increase in micro truth-tellers (Harsin, 2018a; Capilla, 2021) (Figure 1). These precursors contribute to the creation and reproduction of the three post-truth conditions, namely widespread mistrust, competing truth claims, and polarization (Ott, 2017; Harsin, 2018a). In turn, post-truth conditions lead to practices and a subjectivity that are both shaped by, and continue to reproduce, post-truth conditions. These post-truth practices are the normalization of misinformation and disinformation (Iyengar & Massey, 2019), and the fragmentation of knowledge production (Harsin, 2015, 2018a) (Figure 1). My underlying premise here is that while post-truth conditions will affect all aspects of society, including all

markets, to some degree, some social contexts (and markets) are particularly susceptible to being influenced by post-truth conditions.

2.1 Strategic Manipulation of Information

While lying is not a new human phenomenon, for most of human history there were trustworthy knowledge authorities that members of a culture could collectively agree on as reliable sources of honest information. Since the early 1990s, public dialogue began moving towards suspecting politicians of intentionally manipulating information shared with their constituents in service of their own agendas (Kozinets et al., 2020). Concerns over misinformation, where knowledge authorities share erroneous information that they believe to be true, grew into more serious accusations of disinformation, where knowledge producers deliberately spread inaccurate information (Harsin, 2018a). The belief that bad-faith actors intentionally manipulate information that is shared with the public in order to serve their own strategic goals was supported by an increase in accusatory political strategy, where opponents began to rely less on establishing distinct platforms, and to rely more on political attack ads to undermine one another's claims. Because "disinformers may produce misinformers" (Harsin, 2018a, p. 8), members of a post-truth society begin to believe that any truth claim must be personally verified, since it could be shared by someone with honest intentions but who was influenced by a bad-faith actor. Harsin (2018a) describes the "public problems" that contribute to post-truth conditions as:

"Epistemic (false knowledge, competing truth claims); fiduciary (distrust of society-wide authoritative truth-tellers, trust in micro-truth-tellers); and ethicomoral (conscious disregard for factual evidence—bullshitting—or intentional, strategic falsehoods/lying—dishonesty), the latter of which is often bracketed or abstracted into institutional logics of

political strategy.” (Harsin, 2018a, p. 4)

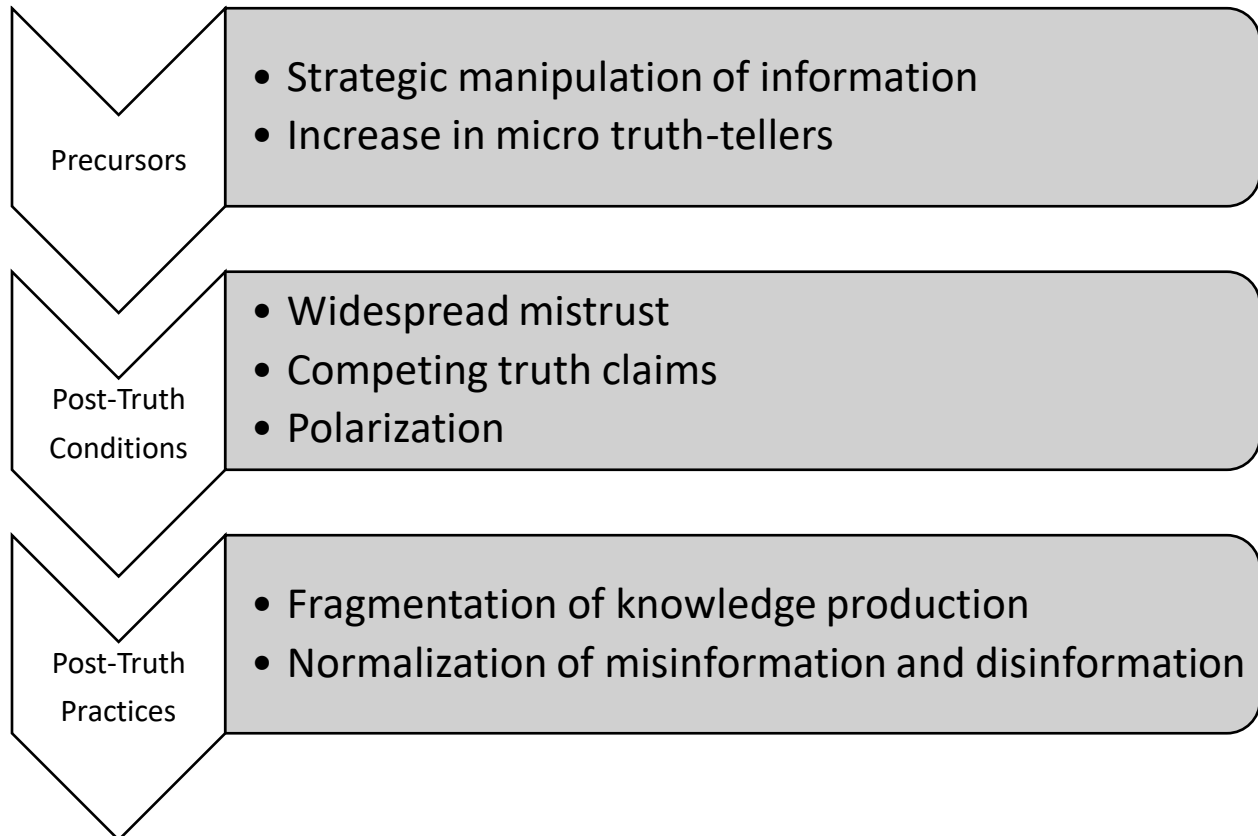
The intentional manipulation of information, what Harsin (2018a) calls an “ethicomoral” public problem, is not only widespread and normalized, but has come to be expected. In other words, the problem is not simply that previously trusted knowledge authorities, such as politicians, are more brazen in their dishonesty, but that members of the affected society come to *expect* that previously trusted authorities are no longer trustworthy. The normalization of disinformation numbs social actors towards the increase in competing truth claims, which is one of the three post-truth conditions. As the post-truth subject grows suspicious of claims made by traditional knowledge authorities (Iyengar & Massey, 2019), alternative truth claims that might have previously seemed outlandish now become entertained along with authoritative truth claims, since both appear just as likely to be disinformation.

2.2 Micro Truth-Tellers

According to Harsin (2014; 2015), a post-truth society is characterized by the deliberate production and targeting of content in competing bids for the chance to pinpoint the ‘truth.’ He describes the increase in “micro-truth-tellers” (Harsin, 2018a, p. 4), which are social actors or institutions who lacked the historical power to produce knowledge, yet who currently compete for the attention and trust of the public. For instance, the growth of “citizen journalism” (Harsin, 2018a) indicates that nearly anyone with access to basic technological tools, such as internet access and a phone camera, can claim a platform for the production of information. In a society where anyone can present themselves as a truth-teller, the practice of truth-seeking becomes an individual rather than a collective endeavor, which further reinforces the loss of communal knowledge sources. This fragments knowledge in several ways. First, the growing numbers of micro truth-tellers are in direct competition with each other for the attention and trust of a truth-

seeking audience. This competition, compounded by the post-truth condition of mistrust, positions micro truth-tellers in opposition to each other rather than as members of a cooperative knowledge production effort. In this type of “truth market” (Harsin, 2018a), where information is produced in competing bids for determining truth, knowledge production is fragmented, and social actors are incentivized to reinforce mistrust and suspicion towards competitors. Moreover, this climate where misinformation and disinformation are normalized, and new social actors produce increasingly competing truth claims, a new type of truth-teller emerges in direct response to post-truth conditions: the profit-driven information brokers and rumor debunking journalistic outlets (Harsin, 2018a). The existence of social actors dedicated to debunking misinformation adds to the growing numbers of information outlets, and consequently to the fragmentation of knowledge production.

Figure 1. *Precursors, Conditions, and Practices of Post-Truth.*



3 Ideology and Discourse in Post-Truth Markets

This section outlines the philosophical underpinnings behind the theoretical application of ideology and discourse in this study and provides a justification for my use of critical discourse analysis (CDA). I approach the relationship between knowledge and discourse as theorized by Žižek (2016) and Foucault (1970), who argue that there is no truth behind ideology. In other words, what consumers and other actors consider trustworthy knowledge will always be colored by the ideological lens(es) shaping the human interpretation of sensory experience. This means that actors might not be consciously aware of the influence of ideology on their beliefs or behaviors, yet they may reproduce and dynamically co-create ideology through the production of discourse.

Studies of ideology in consumer research have examined the ideological use of language, or discourse, a term that has been used broadly to characterize everything from consumer speech and utterances to mass media discourses and institutional-level phenomena such as individualism and capitalism (e.g., Coskuner-Balli, 2020; Belk et al., 2003; Thompson, 2004). Here, I conceptualize discourse as other consumer researchers have done, by understanding it as the manifestation of ideology in language, following the Foucauldian tradition (Kozinets, 2008). For example, Humphreys and Thompson's (2014) study of trust in expert opinion and risk management after environmental disasters demonstrates that mass media discourse appealed to symbols of cleanliness and filth to fulfill the ideological agenda of reinstating public trust in experts and normalizing previously unacceptable levels of environmental risk. In other words, discourse upholds ideology by referencing social values that, in turn, strengthen the ideological agenda. In a similar move, mass media discourse mobilized communist symbolism to support the ideological transition from communism to capitalism in Zhao and Belk's (2012) study of advertising in China's official media.

Foucault (1980) is responsible for the concept of discourse as it is most commonly applied in consumer research, which entails an understanding of discourse not only as micro-level consumer utterances but also market- and macro-level use of language as shaped by ideological power (Kozinets, 2008). Discourse is reproduced by structural forces that seek to sustain dominant systems and to reinforce ideological agendas (Humphreys & Thompson, 2014). It has also been used at the consumer level to both resist ideological agendas and reinforce them (Thompson, 2004). As such, all actors in a marketplace - including consumers, corporations, media, and others - reproduce discourses of power which (whether intentionally or not) invariably benefit various economic, political, or social ideologies.

Post-truth subjects assess not only the trustworthiness of knowledge claims, but also that of truth-tellers and information sources now approached with suspicion and mistrust (Ott, 2017). In the post-truth era, multiple competing ideologies offer a plethora of alternative discourses for the post-truth subject, who is mistrustful of “official” accounts. Despite the normalization of misinformation and disinformation, and the increase in micro truth-tellers, the post-truth society still retains discursive order due to the presence of ideology. In other words, ideology offers discursive scripts for meaning making (Žižek, 2016) even in a time period where there is more contradictory information than ever. Unlike prior theorizations of discourse that emphasize its role in upholding hegemonic ideology and the status quo (Foucault, 1980; Humphreys & Thompson, 2014), the post-truth era offers a time without collective agreement over fundamental aspects of reality, thus fracturing any shared social understanding of a ‘status quo.’ Examining post-truth markets thus can offer insights into how discourses reproduce competing ideologies in the absence of collective knowledge and without shared, trusted knowledge authorities.

Similar to Žižek's (2016) conceptualisation of ideology, Foucault's (1970) regimes of power dictate what is allowed to exist within the realms of human knowledge through shaping the possible discourse. Like Kuhn's (1970) connection between paradigm and language, Foucault's (1970; 1980) connection between episteme and discourse points to the importance, and limitations, of language in the human knowledge creation process. Foucault's (1970; 1980) work, however, inspires the critical element of critical constructivism by raising the issue of power in knowledge creation and highlighting how discourse is not only shaped by the dominant episteme, but serves a functional role to uphold and reproduce power structures. Critical constructivists, drawing on Foucault's work (1970; 1980), approach a research context with questions about what knowledge exists in a society, by whom is it reproduced, and to what ends? The implications of this theorizing for my work is that I attended to how discursive strategies used by participants in my study, as well as by mass media and other traditionally powerful market actors, reinforce or challenge post-truth conditions in the vaping market. To do this, I used CDA (Fairlough, 2015), a contemporary analytical approach that draws on Foucault's (1980) work in order to unravel the relationship between language and power in society.

Methods

1 Data Collection

The data collection focuses on the Canadian vaping marketplace, as the regulatory and ideological context in Canada cannot be assumed to be equivalent to that in other countries. To examine post-truth discourses at the market- and consumer-levels, I collected data from a variety of sources to capture the social movement of language by drawing on both ethnographic (Belk, Fischer, Kozinets, 2012) and netnographic (Kozinets, 2019; Huzzard, 2020) approaches (see Table 1). The study begins with an analysis of ideological discourses at the market- and macro-levels influencing the emergent vaping marketplace through the collection of archival data (Hodgetts & Chamberlain, 2013), such as news media, regulatory, and legal documents, as well as non-participant observation of social media conversations about vaping on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, YouTube, and TikTok. Archival data collection began with the key event (Giesler & Thompson, 2016) of the launch of the Facts Not Fear campaign by Imperial Tobacco in 2019 and continued until August 2022 when data saturation was reached (source). News media was collected retroactively from the introduction of vaping products in Canada in 2006 until 2020, from the Dow Jones Factiva database and using the following keywords: “(tobacco and vaping) or e-cigarettes not (cannabis or marijuana).” This yielded 335 unique media articles, which total 457 pages of single-spaced text. I also collected legislative and regulatory documents from the Canadian government, parliament, and House of Commons websites using the same keywords and timespan as used to search Factiva. This yielded 8 documents totaling 133 pages of single-spaced text. Market-level data about sales, market trends, and consumer demographics was collected from four databases, including Passport ($n = 14$ pages), Marketline ($n = 132$ pages), Simply Analytics ($n = 60$ data points regarding household expenditure on tobacco & vape products, by household income and province of residence), and

Dapresy ($n = 2760$ data points regarding vaping products purchased by various demographics, by province).

Additional data collection focused on discourses (re)produced by various market actors, including consumers, tobacco control advocates, consumer groups, retailers, and pro-vaping activists. This included newsletters obtained by email subscription to the websites of 20 advocacy groups listed in Table 2, nine in-depth interviews with vaping consumers, five in-depth interviews with representatives from advocacy groups participant observation in online consumer support group events and a consumer advocacy conference, as well as web-based and social media data collected through a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2019). Consumers were recruited for in-depth interviews using advertisements on social media platforms where forums for nicotine vaping are held, including Facebook and Reddit. Consumers were also recruited through word-of-mouth and snowball sampling strategies. Representatives from advocacy groups were recruited using email requests sent directly to the organizations listed in Table 2. The interview guides can be found in Appendix A. The in-depth interviews were approached as suggested by McCracken's (1988) recommendations for long interviews, with the interview guide being used as a flexible map to lead a flexible, responsive interviewing style. Interviews lasted between one and two hours. Twelve interviews were conducted virtually using the Zoom platform, one consumer interview was conducted by email, and two consumer interviews were conducted in person.

Table 1. *List of data categories by description of quantity, source, and purpose.*

	Description	Purpose
News media	335 unique media articles were collected from the Dow Jones Factiva database on December 7, 2020 using the following keywords: “(tobacco and vaping) or e-cigarettes not (cannabis or marijuana)” with a time period from 2006 until 2020.	Provide contextual background and identify discursive shifts over time.
Regulatory documents	8 legislative and regulatory documents related to the vaping market, totalling 133 pages of text, were obtained from the Canadian government, parliament, and House of Commons websites.	Identify legislative timeline, government approach, and views of experts consulted.
Market growth data	156 single-spaced pages of market-level data about sales, market trends, and consumer demographics from four databases: Passport, Marketline, Simply Analytics, and Dapresy.	Provide insights into who vape consumers are, and narratives used to describe the growth of this industry.
Mission statements and websites of advocacy associations	Position statements and/or mission statements were collected from the websites of 20 advocacy associations, which were identified by searching the Associations Canada database using the keywords “vape or vaping or tobacco” in June 2020 (see Table 2).	Identify the discourses reproduced by various advocacy groups and associations.
Newsletters of advocacy groups and retail outlets	Newsletters obtained by email subscription to the websites of 20 advocacy groups listed in Table 2 from June 2020 until June 2023.	Identify the discourses reproduced by advocacy groups and retailers as part of marketing to consumers.
Interviews with advocacy association representatives	5 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives from one industry association, three tobacco-control/health associations, and one pro-vape consumer association.	Identify the relationship between discourses reproduced by various associations and their professed stance towards vaping.
Consumer interviews	9 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with consumers who currently vape or did so in the past. Interviews also involved observations of vape products and accessories shared by participants.	Identify consumer discourses regarding the choice to vape and the effect of tighter regulations on consumers.
Ethnographic observation	20 double-spaced pages of field notes from 3 consumer advocacy events and consumer support groups.	Identify dominant discourses among consumer advocates.

Table 2. *List of consumer, health, and industry associations with public positions on vaping, arranged by their stance towards vaping.*

	Consumer Associations	Health Associations	Trade Associations
Supportive	Vaping Advocacy & Education Project Inc		Western Convenience Stores Association
	Tobacco Harm Reduction Association of Canada		American E-Liquid Manufacturing Standards Association
	Rights4Vapers		Smoke-Free Alternatives Trade Association
			North American Vaping Alliance
			Canadian Vaping Association
			Vaping Industry Trade Association
			Electronic Cigarette Trade Association of Canada
Mixed	Non-Smokers' Rights Association	Society for Research on Nicotine & Tobacco	
Opposing		Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada	
		The Ontario Campaign for Action on Tobacco	
		Manitoba Tobacco Reduction Alliance Inc.	
		Action on Smoking & Health	
		Coalition for a Smoke-Free Nova Scotia	
		Smoking & Health Action Foundation	
		Canadian Cancer Society	
		Heart and Stroke Foundation	

1.1 Notes on Data Collection in a Post-Truth Market

Recruiting participants for in-depth interviews (see Table 3) proved to be a difficult task, precisely due to the post-truth conditions that I wished to study. With my background in psychology and community health research, I appreciated the importance of reaching as wide a sample as possible to understand the consumer experience. However, recruiting participants in a market that is particularly affected by post-truth conditions was a challenge. A post-truth subjectivity characterized by suspicion, assumptions of ulterior motives, and defensiveness met my requests for permission to advertise the study on online forums for nicotine vaping. Consider the following responses that I received upon asking permission from moderators of vaping-specific communities on Reddit to advertise the study:

“The sub[Reddit] has seen a very large number of studies either funded by universities that take extreme anti-vaping stances or studies that have in some way received funding through tobacco companies. Collectively, the community is frequently very skeptical of study requests posted here. The greater your transparency regarding your abstract and any funding sources you are receiving, the more likely you are to receive a generally more favorable response from the community.” (Moderator 1)

“Feel free to post. You will probably get a lot [of] hate. We have had our fair share of these ‘vape studies’ and they turned out poorly towards vapers and people are mad.” (Moderator 2)

These are only exemplars from the responses that I received when I requested interviews with vapers and other stakeholders, including industry advocates and health advocacy groups. Whether they held a pro- or anti-vaping stance, potential participants expected a researcher like myself to judge and condemn them for their position. The pervasive belief that researchers are not objective, but are likely to be “funded by universities that take extreme anti-vaping stances”

or “fund[ed] through tobacco companies” echoes the post-truth conditions of mistrust, as well as polarization, since these respondents could not imagine that a researcher might exist in a grey area between the pro- and anti-vaping groups. It also demonstrates that market actors have come to expect a lack of transparency from scientific experts, who are perceived to hold whatever position their funder endorses. Even worse, the suspicion that an academic researcher might be funded by tobacco companies demonstrates the lack of trust in academic experts. Again, this is consistent with the post-truth phenomenon of widespread social mistrust particularly towards experts and other traditional knowledge authorities. Moreover, this suggests that the (post-truth) subjectivity of purported experts is recognized by other actors, who no longer see experts as objective truth-tellers. Overall, the impact of post-truth conditions on this market was apparent early in the data collection process, and the suspicion of market actors towards a researcher claiming to be neutral made participant recruitment in this context a significant challenge.

2 Data Analysis

I use critical discourse analysis, which is based on the Foucauldian theorization of the relationship between power and discourse, as the analytical approach for this study (Fairclough, 2015). The analysis process consisted of a gradual examination of the texts starting from basic coding for language signifying actors, actions, and power dynamics between them to conceptual coding with attention to recurring themes and intertextual tensions (Fairclough, 2015). Following other consumer researchers, I approached the analysis with an abductive lens, and engaged in an iterative coding process, whereby I moved between the data and relevant literature to interpret the data within relevant concepts (Miles, Huberman, Saldaña, 2014). Data analysis was conducted using NVIVO qualitative data analysis software.

The coding approach was similar across the legislative, news media, industry, and association position statement data sets. For each data set, I began with open coding then moved to axial coding (Saldaña, 2021), whereby I attended to the emergent relationships between codes. Then, I proceeded to code for recurring patterns in the data (Saldaña, 2021), guided by the CDA principles of attending to language signifying actors, actions, and power relationships (Fairclough, 2015). I did this first for the legislative data, including reports that were submitted to the consideration of the House of Commons' Committee on Health during the creation of Bill S-5 in Canada, which led to the Tobacco and Vaping Products Act (TVPA) in 2018. Analyzing this literature gave me conceptual insights into the language used by various actors in addition to the state, including legal teams and lobbyist groups that represented both those who desired tight regulation of the vaping industry and those who opposed tight regulation. Next, I moved on to the position statements of the associations identified, some of which had lobbied the House of Commons committee during the creation of the TVPA. Although I began with open coding, I did not hesitate to draw on the codes that had emerged during the earlier analysis of the legislative data. As such, coding these position statements further refined the prior codes and, in this process, I paid particular attention to lexical and conceptual tensions and/or repetitions between the data sets, which would reflect broader discourses present in the vaping marketplace. Then, I analyzed the news media data, again starting with intratextual open coding and axial coding, while abductively considering the codes identified thus far.

The in-depth interview data was collected near the end stage of analysis for the archival data. Participants were recruited between April 2021 and August 2022, during which the interviews were also conducted. I used Fairclough's (2015) recommended process for interpreting text through critical discourse analysis (CDA). I began by observing recurring

patterns between the interview and archival data while I transcribed the interviews, then conducted coded the transcripts twice. First, I conducted open coding to account for codes emerging in the interviews that might not have already emerged in the archival data. Second, I coded the transcripts again by attending to higher level relationships between the emergent codes, and between the language used by participants and language used in the archival data. This yielded 63 codes and over 1600 coded text segments. Moving towards conceptual analysis, I considered the recurring patterns and tensions that emerged between and within the different sets of data and funneled the findings into a preliminary conceptualization of the ideological agendas and actors shaping this marketplace. Then, I adopted the principles of CDA to consider how discourses were structured across participants, noting the function of these discourses when they are reproduced by competing market actors. In other words, I attended to not only *how* different participants echoed certain discourses, but also *why* they do so. I considered how different actors used the various discourses to fulfill psychological, social, or political functions.

From the critical constructivist perspective of the researcher as research instrument, I engaged in reflexive note taking and memo writing throughout the analysis process (Saldaña, 2021), recognizing that my prior knowledge of health policy and regulation necessarily informed my approach to the data. Examining discourse in my dissertation research was critical for understanding how knowledge is produced and consumed in a post-truth market, because market actors may not always be forthcoming, or might be unaware of the influence of ideological agendas on their attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors. According to Žižek (2016) and Foucault (1970), there is no truth behind ideology - what we know will always be colored by the ideological lens(es) shaping the human interpretation of sensory experience. This has two implications for how I approached my dissertation research. First, an awareness that knowledge

cannot exist outside of ideology sensitizes me to the critical theorists' calls for self-questioning and self-reflection. I aimed, whenever possible, to apply a critical lens to my own taken-for-granted beliefs, the things I consider to be so factual that they require no explanation, for these are the 'unknown knowns' that Žižek (2016) says are the insidious elements of ideology. To address this, I subjected myself and my analysis to critical self-reflection and utilized data triangulation to ensure that I did not implicitly disregard important aspects of the research context due to preconceived notions. Second, during both data collection and analysis, I attended to what participants and other sources of data treat as 'facts' unquestioningly, since ideology serves a function to present things as natural and true (Žižek, 2016). This approach is also another reason to critically examine the power dynamics among discourses, as these can be observed whether individual market actors are aware of them or not.

Table 3. *List of Interview Participants*

Participant	Age Range	Category	Smoking experience	Age started smoking	Vaping experience
Matthew	40-50	Industry advocate	Ex-smoker	Unknown	Current vaper
Violet	50-60	Health advocate	None		None
Cora	40-50	Consumer advocate	Ex-smoker	Unknown	Current vaper
Edith	40-50	Health advocate	Ex-smoker	16	None
Robert	50-60	Health advocate	None		None
Tom	20-30	Consumer	None		Current vaper
Sybil	20-30	Consumer	Ex-smoker	20	Current vaper
Carson	60-70	Consumer	Ex-smoker	13	Current vaper
Anthony	50-60	Consumer	Ex-smoker	14	Current vaper
Joseph	20-30	Consumer	Ex-smoker	17	Former vaper
Alfred	30-40	Consumer	Ex-smoker	Unknown	Current vaper
Jimmy	30-40	Consumer	Ex-smoker	Unknown	Current vaper
Mary	40-50	Consumer	Current smoker	12	Current vaper
Henry	40-50	Consumer	Current smoker	26	Current vaper

3 The Study Context

Before presenting the findings, it is helpful to consider the history of the nicotine vaping market in Canada. This section begins with a historical overview of the market, then offers an overview of the competing discourses, and competing stakeholders, that have shaped this market. I also argue that post-truth conditions have played an important role in shaping the contemporary status of nicotine vaping.

3.1 Historical Overview of the Vaping Market

The first device to deliver nicotine outside of traditional smoking, which involves combustion of tobacco, was patented in 1963 by Herbert Gilbert. This “smokeless non-nicotine cigarette” (Gilbert, 1963) was the pre-cursor to the contemporary vape, yet it did not find commercial success at the time when cigarette smoking was still largely uncontested by medical evidence. Forty years later, the modern e-cigarette was patented by Hon Lik (2003), a Chinese inventor whose personal struggle to quit smoking became part of the origin story early branding of e-cigarettes, which were hailed as a revolutionary tool for smoking cessation. This was initially supported by health experts who suggested that e-cigarettes or ‘vapes,’ so-called for producing vapour instead of smoke, were a healthier mode of nicotine consumption given the absence of the toxins associated with combustible tobacco (Middlekauff, 2015).

Within ten years, this narrative of vapes as a positive health intervention was being challenged by health advocacy groups, such as the Campaign for Smoke-Free Kids and the Heart and Stroke Foundation, who claimed that vapes were in fact not reducing adult smoking rates but rather initiating a new generation of nicotine consumers (Heart and Stroke Foundation, 2020). Since 2015, a second controversy has shaped the market, as increasing reports were made of an unknown, vape-related lung illness (Modi, Sangani, Alhajhusain, 2015). Currently, health advocacy groups such as the Heart and Stroke Foundation (2020) and the Canadian Cancer

Society (2023) have taken a firm position against nicotine vapes. Instead, these health advocacy groups cite the increasing evidence that vaping is associated with a poorly understood pulmonary disease currently known as e-cigarette or vaping product use associated lung injury (EVALI) (CDC, 2019). Since 2020, tighter regulations have been enacted at the federal and provincial levels to restrict the production and sales of nicotine vapes in Canada.

Between 2015 and 2016, both the United States and Canada were in the process of creating legislation to regulate the production and sale of vaping products. This legal process highlighted the plethora of stakeholders in this marketplace, as it included reports and testimonials from market actors ranging from industry associations, health experts, health associations, and consumers. Indeed, the passing of *The Nicotine and Vaping Products Act* (TVPA) in Canada in 2018 was preceded by the submission to the House of Commons (2015) and the Senate a slew of reports and petitions from various interested stakeholders, such as industry associations, who argued that regulating the vaping industry would infringe on Canadian consumers' personal liberties (e.g., Cambridge LLP, 2017).

While Canadian regulations currently limit the sales of flavored vape products and prescribe punitive measures for marketing towards young consumers (Bill S-5, 2018), the vaping marketplace has seen a simultaneous growth in sales and consumption (Marketline, 2018), as well as an increase in negative sentiment among the broader culture (Canseco, 2022). Since 2019, JUUL - one of the biggest vape brands - has been subject to at least two individual personal injury lawsuits in Canada (Stephens v JUUL Labs Inc, 2019; O'Donnell v JUUL Labs Inc, 2020), and over 5000 class-action and personal injury lawsuits in the United States (Turner, 2023), which alleged that the company targeted its marketing towards young people and that it did not disclose the harmful health effects of vaping, respectively. Since 2022, JUUL has been

ordered to pay over \$400 million to settle lawsuits in the United States alleging that the company marketed vaping to youth (Larson & Nayak, 2023). With JUUL as the most well-known brand of nicotine vapes, these allegations have negatively affected public perceptions of the vaping market as a whole. Similarly, the nicotine vaping market continues to be highly controversial among stakeholders such as health experts, health advocates, government regulators, and consumer groups.

3.2 Competing Discourses in the Vaping Market

To study how consumers navigate markets that are susceptible to post-truth conditions, a fruitful context is one where multiple stakeholders make competing truth claims and seek to undermine their opponents. The nicotine vaping marketplace fits this criterion well. Since the first e-cigarette was patented in 2003, a discursive battle has been waged by a motley crew of market stakeholders seeking to define and shape this market (Giesler & Fischer, 2017). These stakeholders include corporations, retailers, industry associations, legal associations, health charities and tobacco control groups, consumer groups, health experts, and governments, as well as consumers. Post-truth conditions are apparent in the language used by these various actors to describe the market. Consider the following message in an e-newsletter sent by a pro-vaping consumer advocacy group:

“Welcome to The Vapers’ Roundup (TVR).

We believe that the mainstream media doesn’t do a good job at covering vaping. There is so much good news out there. The Vapers’ Roundup will consolidate all the vaping news from around the world in one place.

We will not discriminate. We will include anti- and pro-vaping news. Let’s try to make sense of it all together.

We will send the Vapers' Roundup every two weeks to our subscribers.

If you get tired of us, just hit the unsubscribe button. We will be sad to see you go but we understand. Enjoy and let's save vaping together with facts!" (Rights4Vapers e-newsletter, April 7, 2022)

This excerpt from the newsletter sent by Rights4Vapers (a consumer advocacy group) captures the three post-truth conditions that shape this market. First, mistrust towards traditional information authorities can be seen in the belief that "mainstream media doesn't do a good job" of presenting thorough, trustworthy coverage of the vaping market. Second, the normalization of competing truth claims can be seen by the newsletter positioning itself as a neutral, alternative news source that does "not discriminate" and will include "so much good news" that is portrayed as being intentionally silenced by mainstream media. Finally, polarization in the market is recognized by the description of "anti- and pro-vaping news," a phrase that acknowledges not only the 'two sides' in the market but also a belief that "news" is not objective, but inherently shaped by one of two ideological agendas. Notably, by acknowledging the impact of post-truth conditions on the vaping market, this text appeals to the reader who might be struggling to "make sense of it all" by presenting itself as a neutral source of information in a market riddled with mistrust, competing truth claims, and polarization.

Beyond the competing agendas of pro-vaping and anti-vaping voice, the vaping market also faces discord within these polarized factions. For example, competing agendas exist among pro-vaping industry advocates. A key distinction is made within the industry between 'open vapor' retailers (CVA, 2021, 2023), convenience stores (WCSA, 2017), and 'Big Tobacco' (THRA, 2021). 'Open vapor' encompasses vaping products that utilize e-juice or e-liquids in combination with modular battery and accessory sets (THRA, 2021). This is to be differentiated

from vaping products that consist of proprietary pods and batteries that are both created by the same brand, such as JUUL, which are typically sold in convenience stores. Several lawsuits have been launched in Canada by consumers against JUUL, alleging that the company used misleading tactics to portray vapes as healthy products while neglecting to warn consumers of possible harmful effects, citing research that bolsters that claim (e.g., Jackler et al., 2019). There is ample evidence that pod vape brands, in particular, advertised to a broad consumer segment not restricted to adult smokers wishing to quit, using celebrity endorsements (Brandchannel, 2015), buying advertisement spots on cartoon networks and youth magazines (Kaplan, 2020), and using social media influencers with a primarily young audience (Jackler et al., 2019). In response to accusations of having launched a ‘teen vaping epidemic’ (Wall Street Journal, 2019), JUUL adopted a largely apologetic tone and asserted its cooperation with regulators and public health actors to reduce youth consumption of its products.

Nicotine vaping is a once-promising market that has been shaped by controversy over the past decade. This controversy has been fueled in part by the aforementioned growing reports of mysterious lung-illnesses afflicting vapers, sometimes leading to serious lung damage or death (Marketline, 2019). Physicians and public health authorities argue that this new, vaping-related lung illness is of more immediate concern, and less of a moralistic one, than that of nicotine addiction. This has led to even greater complexity in the ideological negotiations between those who highlighted the potential harms of vaping and those who continued to see vaping as an approach to harm reduction when compared with cigarette smoking. Hence, a central controversy on which actors are polarized is whether or not nicotine vaping can be considered ‘safe.’ The question of how to categorize vapes, whether as ‘safer’ products for smokers who do not wish to stop consuming nicotine, or as smoking cessation tools akin to other nicotine alternatives like

gum, is a key pivot point for the polarized “pro-vape” and “anti-vape” positions. Another pivotal point relates to the differing social views on the morality of making addictive substances available to the public, and of normalizing the dependence on substances like nicotine.

Stakeholders in this market hold steadfastly to their pro- or anti-vape stance, all asserting a total inability to comprehend how their opponents can reasonably hold the opposing view. In the next chapter, the study findings offer insights into how post-truth conditions reinforce these divergent ideological positions.

Findings

Through an analysis of data collected in the context of Canada's nicotine vaping market, I have sought to answer three research questions: **First, why are some markets particularly susceptible to being impacted by post-truth conditions? Second, how are susceptible markets impacted by post-truth conditions? Third, how do consumers navigate markets impacted by post-truth conditions?** Here I present an overview of the findings before answering each research question in detail.

First, three characteristics make some markets 'post-truth markets' which are highly susceptible to being influenced by post-truth conditions: 1) a history of stigma, 2) changes in expert opinions, and 3) authority intervention to restrict production and/or consumption. These characteristics are important because they activate suspicion among market actors who are influenced by a post-truth subjectivity. Moreover, these characteristics heighten post-truth conditions within the market.

Second, markets that are susceptible to influence by post-truth conditions become impacted through two mechanisms: moral contestation and epistemic contestation. These mechanisms are created and reproduced through competing, polarized discourses of morality and truth by various market actors, including industry representatives, legislators, experts, and consumers. Epistemic contestation, in particular, can lead to market category confusion.

Third, consumers develop three strategies to navigate a market that has been impacted by post-truth conditions. These consumer strategies include: seeking alternative truth sources using both relational and embodied knowledge; entrepreneurship and self-reliance; and engaging in activism. The degree to which consumers engage in each of these three strategies is shaped by

each consumer's past experiences of feeling stigmatized or alienated from dominant cultural narratives and mainstream markets.

In answering these research questions, the data analysis yielded a conceptualization of post-truth markets. The concept of post-truth markets describes markets that are susceptible to post-truth conditions, where actors compete for the production of truth narratives, yet the multiplicity of truth-telling efforts leads to contestation in the market. Specifically, actors in a post-truth market not only create competing truth narratives, but also navigate and undermine opponents' truth-telling efforts using strategies shaped by a post-truth subjectivity.

1 Characteristics Contributing to the Emergence of Post-Truth Markets

In this section, I introduce three characteristics that contribute to a market's susceptibility to post-truth conditions: historical stigma, authority intervention, and shifts in expert opinion. These characteristics appeal to the post-truth subjectivity, which makes market actors suspicious of competing truth claims and inclines them to take polarized positions. These three characteristics also contribute to reproducing post-truth conditions, such as social mistrust, competing truth claims, and polarization (Harsin, 2018a), in a recursive feedback loop where discourses within the market are shaped by, and further reproduce, the sociopolitical environment of the post-truth era.

1.1 Historical Stigma

In markets where consumers feel stigmatized by mainstream social attitudes towards their consumption practice, they are more likely to be open to 'alternate facts' that contrast those promulgated by stigmatizers. The vaping market inherited from the combustible tobacco market not only a stigma towards nicotine consumption, but also a stigma towards smokers. The existence of powerful stigmatizing discourses in opposition to a growing critical mass of

supporters makes markets that emerge from, or are otherwise associated with, historical stigma opportune contexts for social mistrust, competing claims, and polarization to flourish.

The stigma towards nicotine consumption had, over decades of public health messaging, become intertwined with the stigma towards smoking due its health consequences. In fact, anti-smoking campaigns intentionally mobilized emotions such as guilt and shame in their efforts to fight the social acceptability of smoking (Amonini, Pettigrew, Clayforth, 2015). Prior literature demonstrates that public health campaigns to promote smoking cessation have given rise to stigma towards not only smokers (Evans-Polce, Castaldelli-Maia, Schomerus, Evans-Lacko, 2015), but also lung cancer patients, regardless of whether they had a history of smoking or not (Riley, Ulrich, Hamann, Ostroff, 2017). As nicotine vaping was invented for adult smokers who wish to quit smoking, there is a significant overlap between the consumer groups of the traditional tobacco market and the nicotine vaping market. Some pro-vaping advocates and vaping consumers believe that this historical stigma towards smokers is the reason their views have not been taken into consideration by government authorities aiming to tighten industry regulations. One participant in a consumer support group stated:

“Smokers are discriminated against daily even by their own families. My children treat me as less of a person, society dictated them to do that. The compassion is gone. You are told not to shame every other demographic: LGBT, overweight, minorities. But the smoker, shame them daily, hourly.” (Marilyn, former smoker and current vape consumer)

This participant, like the majority of pro-vaping consumers in this study, had smoked for many years before switching completely to vaping. Their lived experience of being shamed by society and those close to them reflects how normalized the stigma against smokers has become. Another participant in the consumer support group pointed out that vaping retail stores are most

successful in neighbourhoods where residents are marginalized due to class or race. Indeed, this echoes evidence showing that rates of smoking are higher among poor and racialized communities (Farrimond & Joffe, 2006), who are socially shunned due to the doubled ‘pollution’ of having low socio-economic status as well as smoking.

Markets where the products or consumers are stigmatized by hegemonic social discourses are particularly susceptible to post-truth conditions for several reasons. First, a subjectivity shaped by post-truth conditions affects all market actors, including both those whose views are aligned with hegemonic discourses and those whose identities, views, or behaviors have been marginalized. This sets a tone of mutual mistrust across market actors, particularly among those who have been stigmatized towards those who are supporters of hegemonic discourses. In this context, adults who found vaping to be an effective practice for smoking cessation have faced stigmatizing discourses against smokers for many years. Consequently, they mistrust organizations that promote shame-based tobacco control messages (Amonini et al., 2015), such as Health Canada and health advocacy groups, some of which continue to treat vaping (and vapers) as being just as undesirable as smoking. Second, those who are marginalized currently have unprecedented access to alternative (non-hegemonic) truth sources and truth narratives, and this empowers them to use and reproduce alternative narratives, leading to multiple, competing truth claims. Finally, those who have been stigmatized for their involvement in the market now have a foundation of mistrust towards those who have reproduced stigmatizing discourses, as well as increasing access to alternative truth claims, both of which enable them to act collectively against those who endorse stigmatizing discourses. This reinforces a bipartisan or polarized marketplace. In other words, post-truth conditions enable those who have faced stigma to question hegemonic discourses that have contributed to their stigma, then to seek and reproduce

alternate truth narratives to undermine hegemonic discourses, and finally to pose a powerful alternative voice to that of dominant actors that had previously shaped market discourses without being challenged.

1.2 Authority Intervention

Widespread mistrust towards traditional sources of knowledge renders authoritative attempts to restrict a market suspicious and worthy of scrutiny. In the case of the nicotine vaping market, attempts by governments and health authorities to restrict the market triggered suspicion and mistrust among various actors. Proponents of the vaping market had initially welcomed early efforts to regulate the vaping market in hopes that federal regulation would add legitimacy after the market had operated in a legal grey area for over a decade. However, recently proposed regulations at the federal and provincial levels in Canada aim to restrict the production and sales of nicotine vapes. These restrictive interventions, which are supported by health experts and tobacco control groups, have not only exacerbated the post-truth condition of widespread mistrust within the market, but also have created and reproduced increasing polarization among pro-vaping and anti-vaping advocacy groups.

In Canada, the nicotine vaping industry is subject to federal regulation as well as provincial and municipal regulation. Federally, four Acts legislate the vaping industry: The Tobacco and Vaping Products Act (TVPA), Canada Consumer Product Safety Act, Food and Drugs Act, and the Non-smokers' Health Act (Government of Canada, 2020). These regulations were introduced between 2015 and 2017, when the dominant narrative at the time was the initial value proposition of vaping as a safer alternative to smoking. However, in 2019 the first reports emerged of what is now known as 'e-cigarette or vaping associated lung injury' (EVALI) (CDC, 2019), and it was then that health authorities began raising alarms about the unknown impacts of

inhaling e-vapor, the quality of which was compromised by a nascent counterfeit market. As such, the first steps toward regulating the nicotine vaping market were untainted by the later discourses of the health risks of vaping. It is therefore important to distinguish between the initial regulation of the market, through TVPA, and subsequent restrictions on the production and sales of vapes:

“In 2018, when TVPA came in, when they announced it - I was like, great! We're regulated! We're going to go under some review, we're going to have cleaner products. We're going to have safer products. We're going to have more access, you know what, this is going to be great. And then, EVALI happened in 2019. And that was the end. And that was a crash and everything that happened with regulations after that were reactions to something that has nothing to do with vaping electronic cigarettes. That's where I've seen the change, not in regulations, not in the announcement of the regulations, but EVALI happened in 2019, which caused nicotine caps. You know, Health Canada has put out a couple of studies that have also, the data has been retracted a couple of times. Saying that the youth use [vapes] and everything like that. What they don't celebrate is that less than 5% of youth use smoking products in Canada, less than 5% of kids smoke. And that's a huge stumper for them. There are like 4.2% of youth smoking in Canada, but now they're worried about vaping.” (Cora, business-owner and consumer advocate)

As noted by Cora, authority intervention was first welcomed by proponents of the vaping market who expected regulation to legitimize the production and consumption of nicotine vapes. At that point, the market was not yet tainted by fears of EVALI, which triggered ensuing competing truth claims and the subsequent polarization of market actors. However, she condemns the regulatory restrictions that have been proposed since cases of EVALI began to

emerge in 2019. These restrictions include nicotine caps, or limits to nicotine content in vaping products, as well as restrictions to the availability of, and access to, vaping products, and increased taxation. These restrictive interventions have led pro-vaping business-owners and consumers to deeply mistrust regulatory authorities such as Health Canada, whose actions to restrict the vaping market appear counter-productive to pro-vaping advocates, who claim that vaping has reduced smoking rates, even among youth.

Accusations of sinister agendas behind government restrictions were echoed across the data, with many pro-vaping consumers and advocates mistrusting the intentions of regulatory authorities, who are attempting to restrict the market (see Table 4). For example, consumers like Anthony, who had attempted to quit smoking many times over 30 years, echoed the belief that market restrictions reflect misinformation at the government level:

“Honestly, most of those changes [TVPA] I actually welcomed. I've never vaped in a restaurant, I've never vaped on public transport, never vaped in an environment where some non-smoker or non-vaper was around. Most of those changes were actually good, but for the wrong reasons. You regulate something and you tell your reasoning for that regulation. The move was correct, but the reasons the government provided were wrong. I mean they put vaping and smoking together into one bag and they presented it like vaping had the same results as smoking. I mean, sure you can state that you're not allowed to vape next to a non-smoker, but don't say you're not allowed to do it because he's going to get cancer, that you're giving them all these toxic gases. There are no toxic gases by the time nicotine goes into your lungs, nothing really comes outside except water vapour. It's proven. It's a fact. It's done in research. Even the bad research, even they don't deny there's no such thing as second-hand vapour. Vapers just don't do it [vape

in public] because someone else may feel uncomfortable. The government, the research, the reasoning, all this is wrong. I couldn't yell and say it while it was in motion, right? I agreed with the motion, but the reasoning was wrong. And I had no idea where it was actually leading to.” (Anthony, former smoker and current vape consumer)

Consumers like Anthony were particularly suspicious of Health Canada’s proposed ban on flavored vaping products and the restriction on nicotine content in e-liquid. Many felt that Health Canada’s restrictive regulations reflected an intentional disregard for consumers’ positive experiences with vaping as an alternative to smoking, and this reinforced the perception that health authorities must have sinister agendas for restricting a market that many have found helpful to quit smoking. Competing truth claims from pro-vaping advocates and consumers versus health authorities and policymakers reinforce mistrust among these market actors and further polarize them. Because post-truth conditions are sociopolitical, they emerge simultaneously from outside and within the market, meaning that market actors approach matters with a subjectivity informed by a broader social belief in systemic deception, with no institution or authority deemed inherently trustworthy (Harsin, 2018a). This is evidenced by market actors believing in other actors’ ulterior motives, a pervasive belief which I observed across my sample of interviewees. Indeed, for each viewpoint I gathered, there was some counterpoint by another market actor pointing out contradictions or inconsistencies (see Table 4). Harsin (2018a) and Stoker (2017) attribute a belief in systemic deception along with a lack of shared social authority to pervasive social mistrust as characteristic of the post-truth era. In my data, accusations of dishonesty were levied by market actors not only against each other, but especially against authoritative institutions like government regulators who were seen as intervening to restrict the market for unclear or contradictory reasons.

1.3 Shifts in Expert Opinions

Markets characterized by changing expert opinions are susceptible to being affected by post-truth conditions for two reasons. First, the breakdown of social trust that is characteristic of the contemporary post-truth era (Harsin, 2018a) particularly undermines trust in experts who traditionally were considered trustworthy truth-tellers. This means that post-truth subjects are primed to be suspicious of experts, and this inclination towards suspicion is exacerbated by inconsistency in expert opinions. Second, there is a disconnect between public narratives and expert narratives due to fundamental epistemic differences. Science-based experts, such as medical or public health experts, view knowledge as a progressive endeavor, which is bound to be continually refined, and to become more accurate as new evidence arises (Kuhn, 1970). Contemporary science and public health experts participate in what Anthony Giddens calls “modernity’s reflexivity,” which:

“refers to the susceptibility of most aspects of social activity, and material relations with nature, to chronic revision in the light of new information of knowledge. Such information or knowledge is not incidental to modern institutions, but constitutive of them – a complicated phenomenon, because many possibilities of reflection about reflexivity exist in modern social conditions.” (Giddens, 1991, p. 20).

Public narratives of truth, however, are often shaped by a desire for a consistent narrative of facts that resonate with cultural norms. Post-truth subjects are mistrustful of traditional knowledge authorities and are left to individually navigate pervasive misinformation and polarization (Iyengar & Massey, 2019; Strassheim, 2022). This exacerbates the post-truth subject’s need for consistent narratives of truth. In the post-truth era, changes in expert opinion that are inherently part of the scientific process thus appear to contribute to competing truth claims because earlier expert opinions, which might differ from or even contradict contemporary

expert opinions, are invoked by the post-truth subject as evidence that experts cannot be trusted (Iyengar & Massey, 2019).

The legacy of the combustible tobacco market informs the nicotine vaping market, and it further undermines the authority of regulatory, medical, and public health experts who are remembered for downplaying the risks of smoking for decades after the first evidence linking smoking to cancer emerged in the 1950s (Baum, 2018). Some participants attributed their mistrust of medical experts and Health Canada to the history of cigarettes; cigarettes were initially promoted by physicians as a calming aide for stress and anxiety. Consumers in my sample pointed to what they saw as deception and betrayal by physicians and government authorities in the late 20th century over the real risks of smoking, and used this as historical evidence for their mistrust in current experts' anti-vaping stances:

“Have you seen the video? It's on YouTube right now. It's from the 1970s, a bunch of doctors sitting around the table saying smoking is actually good for you. The tobacco companies actually paid doctors to sit down around the table. There's like 10 to 15 of them. It's a recorded TV broadcast, and it's on YouTube. Doctors are saying how smoking is good for you and they're smoking at the table. And they said it causes cancer later on, but first that they were all on board, and the government believed them. Everybody was smoking, it was a cool thing to do. Now, the doctors are saying vaping is bad and the government is listening to them.” (Anthony, former smoker and current vape consumer)

In the contemporary vaping market, public trust has weakened due to a drastic shift in expert opinion between the initial support for vapes from medical experts who saw vaping as a harm reduction approach to nicotine consumption, to the current view of the medical community

which emphasizes the unknown risks of vaping. Indeed, there is a pervasive suspicion among vapers that medical experts' current warnings against vaping are once again deceptive messages benefitting Big Tobacco, designed to push consumers back towards smoking. Anthony's perspective is one example of the mistrust towards experts that emerged in my consumer interviews. The pervasive mistrust among market actors is evident in the common belief that other actors have ulterior motives that do not align with their public claims (see Table 4). Changing expert opinions about vaping have caused distress and confusion for consumers who desire consistent information, but are instead met with competing truth claims:

“I'm not sure which is right: there was a science report that came out that said you were more likely to get COVID if you use nicotine, another scientific report said nicotine worked against COVID and PEG [polyethylene glycol]¹ is antibiotic. So you would be better protected against COVID if you're vaping. And I don't know which is right. Because, you know, there always seems to be competing factors, especially in the States where this is all driven by Big Tobacco and I don't know if it is or not, but it's hard to discern when you're looking for information, is the information you're reading even right? Or is this really just another bogus study trying to vilify this industry?” (Carson, former smoker and current vape consumer)

A sense of betrayal permeates narratives evoked by consumers like Carson, who pointed to the historical tobacco strategy as evidence of health experts corrupted by financial interest, misleading not only consumers but also the governments who ought to protect them, thus

1. PEG is a contentious ingredient in e-liquids.

reinforcing contemporary mistrust in both health experts and governments. This contextual history contributes directly to market actors' suspicion of medical and scientific experts, in addition to reinforcing the climate of mistrust characterizing the post-truth subjectivity. The post-truth subjectivity, in turn, sensitizes market actors to such historical evidence of shifting expert opinions, seemingly driven by a profit motive rather than by the care for public health with which they were entrusted, as well as governments which appeared to blindly follow them rather than staying accountable to consumers.

The historical shift in expert opinions on nicotine and tobacco is not the only instance of medical experts drastically changing their opinions and practices. Other cases of medical advice deemed erroneous by modern evidence, such as the 19th century prescriptions of mercury, lead, or cocaine (Badke, 2003), have not been reinterpreted as proof that current medical experts ought not to be trusted, but are rather generally understood to be relics of incomplete scientific knowledge. The historical tobacco strategy differs from these other instances owing to the presence of a conflict of interest in the form of financial benefits paid by tobacco companies to physicians (Proctor, 2020), and even smoking advertisements published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (Jackler & Ayoub, 2018). This historical conflict of interest supports the contemporary suspicion towards experts who warn against the potential risks of nicotine vaping, and it encourages the post-truth subject's suspicion that experts have ulterior motives.

Notably, a tone of mistrust towards knowledge claims also emerged in interviews with advocates, some of whom would be considered experts in their field by other stakeholders. In other words, both those who oppose and those who support the nicotine vape market evoked the

historical tobacco strategy (Baum, 2018) in support of their suspicions against the current stances of regulatory and medical experts towards vaping:

“Vaping is like the most recent version of a historic practice. The harmfulness of tobacco was kind of known without there being the direct link with cancer, but people knew that tobacco was unhealthy. They knew people coughed and so forth and [they said] ‘We’ll put filters on it’ and then filters became ‘clean.’ There were a lot of ads, doctors recommended them even - this was even before the cancer link was well established and then [they] moved to light cigarettes. And ‘we’re going to lower the tar, so if you can’t quit, switch.’ And this was a big thing. Well it took 20 years before the epidemiology came in to show, guess what? Light cigarettes, because the air was diluted with smoke, people push it further into their lungs. There was no reduction in lung cancer. But in fact, there were more of certain types of cancer. Now, it’s ‘Okay, well we can’t make cigarettes safer. We can’t fool them into thinking that cigarettes are safer. We don’t want to stop selling cigarettes. We don’t want to stop serving our clients. So, we have to do something else to show that we’re on the side of the angels.’ And now vaping products is the thing.”

(Violet, tobacco control and anti-vaping advocate)

Despite being considered an expert herself in the tobacco control field, Violet expresses mistrust in contemporary claims that vaping is a safer alternative to smoking. She bases her mistrust on the historical shift in medical experts’ advice, which began with doctors endorsing smoking, to promoting light cigarettes, and now to supporting vaping. She suggests that vaping is part of a progression whereby medical experts promoted new products as better alternatives to older products they had endorsed, under the guise of having trustworthy knowledge but instead being driven by the profit-focus of “serving our clients.”

The undermining of expert knowledge in contemporary dialogue about vaping is connected to a suspicion of historical expert claims. This is not only a post-truth condition, but it is also consistent with broader societal patterns of growing mistrust in experts, as noted by the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer which found an increase in participants who worry that they are being purposely misled by journalists and reporters (67% of sample), their country's government leaders (66%), and by business leaders (63%). This is a long-simmering pattern, with scientists noting the emergence of a motivated rejection of science nearly a decade ago (Lewandowsky, Oberauer, Gignac, 2013). Humphreys and Thompson's (2014) study of consumer trust in expert opinion and risk management after environmental disasters demonstrates that mass media discourse appeals to mythic representations of cleanliness and filth to fulfill the ideological agenda of reinstating public trust in experts and normalizing previously unacceptable levels of environmental risk. However, diminishing trust in experts and traditional knowledge sources in the post-truth era creates the opportunity for various market actors to scrutinize any contradiction or inconsistency in expert opinion as evidence of deliberate efforts to misinform the public. In the absence of trust in experts, multiple and competing truth claims shape the affected market.

2 Impact of Post-Truth Conditions on Susceptible Markets

This section examines the forms and underlying mechanisms through which post-truth conditions impact susceptible markets. Here, I argue that post-truth conditions lead to contestation in susceptible markets, specifically both moral and epistemic contestation. Moral contestation is well documented in prior consumer research (e.g., Mars et al., 2023; Mimoun et al., 2022; Valor et al., 2021), and this work contributes to that literature by showing how post-truth conditions, such as widespread mistrust and competing truth claims lead to market contestation on the basis of competing moral arguments. Additionally, I introduce the concept of

epistemic contestation as a mechanism by which post-truth conditions transform susceptible markets into contested markets. Epistemic contestation is a concept that emerges from the post-truth literature, and describes contestation based on competing beliefs about trustworthy knowledge. Finally, I argue that epistemic contestation in post-truth markets ultimately leads to market category confusion.

2.1 Moral Contestation

Moral contestation consists of two mechanisms: first, the existence of competing discourses that appeal to moral values, and second, that each discourse functions to undermine the others' moral worth. In a post-truth market, there are not only competing moral discourses, but also the compounding effects of post-truth conditions such as mistrust, competing claims, and polarization, which intensify the effects of competing moral discourses. As such, post-truth conditions lead to moral contestation in a post-truth market by amplifying the impacts of competing moral discourses.

Competing discourses in the nicotine vaping market are shaped by language evoking moral stances around purity, innocence, and medical ethics. In this market, there are two competing discourses that assert moral superiority over each other. One discourse is that of addiction and substance use as pollution, which is a discourse that evokes the moral value of purity and cleanliness. The second discourse is that of harm reduction, which prioritizes keeping consumers safe regardless of their consumption choices. This discourse evokes moral values based in medical ethics, particularly being non-judgmental and minimizing individual risk. In this section, I will first demonstrate how the two competing discourses in this market evoke moral values and undermine each other's moral worth.

The moral value of purity emerged in narratives of vaping beginning in 2015, when the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health accepted testimony from various stakeholders before introducing TVPA, the federal law regulating the vaping market. The report based on these testimonies demonstrates the perceived harms and benefits of vaping prior to 2019, when evidence emerged that vaping might contribute to lung illness. The main concern raised by key witnesses to the Standing Committee were moralistic concerns over nicotine dependence, especially among young people. This concern about the “renormalization effect” (House of Commons, 2015, p. 19), whereby nicotine might once again become a widely used substance, appears to be based in moral anxieties over the threat of widespread substance use. For example, health advocacy groups, such as the Non-Smokers’ Rights Association, warned that vaping might make nicotine “become the next form of addiction that becomes socially acceptable” (House of Commons, 2015, p. 19). There are dedicated groups who engage in tobacco control advocacy, such as Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada, as well as established, well-funded health charities such as the Heart and Stroke Foundation and the Cancer Society. Both types of tobacco control advocates promoted a narrative of vaping that positioned nicotine as a pollutant to the body:

“Our core position on vaping is that if you're using vaping to quit smoking, that certainly is harm reduction, but we also want you to quit the vaping because obviously inhaling anything into your lungs other than air isn't good for you, and may be supporting something that we know could cause harm. But we also know that vaping will reduce harm compared to tobacco smoke. So, if you're going to vape to quit smoking, great, but also quit vaping and basically become nicotine free, inhalant free. So then you're basically just using your lungs for what they were intended to do.” (Robert, tobacco

control advocate)

The moral value of purity is reflected in Robert's allowance for vaping only for smokers who intend to quit nicotine consumption forever, evoking a preferred cleanliness where breathing "anything other than air isn't good" and one's lungs ought to be "nicotine free, inhalant free." This emphasis on purity places tobacco control advocates at odds with some health experts who adopted a harm reduction approach by suggesting that a dependence on nicotine is a lesser problem compared to the harms caused by cigarette toxins. The split between health experts and tobacco control advocates over whether or not a safer method of nicotine consumption ought to be promoted over cigarette smoking reveals an underlying difference in moral values between tobacco control advocates who view substance use as a taint to bodily purity, and health experts who care more about preventing illness than controlling substance use. Interestingly, tobacco control groups and health experts had, prior to the invention of vaping, been unified in their advocacy against cigarette smoking; the former working against the addictive element of nicotine consumption and the latter raising awareness of the cancer risk associated with smoking. This fissure between two groups who had previously shared a single goal foretells the effect of competing discourses within a group of market actors, especially where these competing narratives reflect differing moral values. For health experts, nicotine vaping was the solution to the problems they saw resulting from smoking, namely the cancer risks of tar and smoke inhalation. However, for tobacco control advocates, the health impacts of smoking were merely concrete consequences of what they considered the real problem: consumption of an addictive substance.

Unsurprisingly, pro-vaping advocates deeply mistrust tobacco control advocates' moral appeals against substance use. Both industry representatives and consumer advocates whom I

interviewed attacked the moral integrity of tobacco control groups by suggesting that if tobacco control groups truly wished to reduce smoking rates, they would not advocate for increasing restrictions on the vaping market. One industry advocate asserted that tobacco control groups' efforts to undermine vaping stem from dishonesty and greed:

“Nicotine on its own is benign. As much as caffeine is. There's no cancer-causing agents, anything. The myth has come from Heart and Stroke [Foundation], Lung [Association] and Cancer [Society], and the Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada. They don't talk about smokers at all. The mandate for those agencies is to reduce smoking, that's their mandate. And in no way have they demonstrated that whatsoever. I think it's good PR for them [to focus on nicotine vaping].” (Matthew, industry advocate)

By pointing out that nicotine consumption, in the absence of smoke inhalation and tobacco combustion, has not been shown to contribute to cancer, Matthew articulates a common view among pro-vaping advocates that tobacco control groups base their efforts on disinformation. They are accused of creating and perpetuating a “myth” and spreading panic over a substance that is as “benign” as caffeine, which is widely consumed and socially accepted. His accusations not only reflect the post-truth conditions of mistrust and competing truth claims, but also undermine the moral integrity of tobacco control advocates by framing their anti-vaping efforts as profit-driven and based on false claims. Like him, many consumers question the narrative of pollution in association with the consumption of nicotine, especially in the absence of the toxic chemicals in cigarette smoke.

The second moral discourse is harm reduction, which is based on medical ethics and focuses on non-judgement and minimizing individual risk (specifically to nicotine users). The invention of nicotine vapes led to a distinction between the health risks of smoking combustible

tobacco in cigarettes, and nicotine as the addictive substance within tobacco. In the early years of the vaping marketplace, health professionals and scientists were open to considering the industry's claim that vapes would become the new, safer mode of delivery of nicotine for smokers who wished to quit or those who sought a less harmful method of consuming nicotine. The concept of harm reduction (Roe, 2005) originates in medical ethics and developed as an approach for protecting injection drug users from blood-borne illnesses by providing safer consumption equipment and supervised injection locations. It is a radical shift from the traditional, puritanical emphasis on abstinence-only interventions that dominated medical approaches to addictions in the 20th century (Davis & Rosenberg, 2013). In the early years of the vaping market, health experts placed credibility on claims that vaping could eliminate the risks of smoke inhalation, thus delivering nicotine to smokers in a less harmful way (Cahn & Siegel, 2011), and for reducing the burden on the health care system from the consequences of smoking (House of Commons, 2015). The following is an illustrative quote from a law firm that submitted a testimonial report to the House of Commons:

“Moral disapproval is no substitute for evidence. Therefore, non-evidence-based restrictions on sale and use of e-cigarettes would violate section 7 of the Charter.

Tobacco smoking kills far more Canadians than heroin injection. Cigarette users have the same right as injection drug users not to have their access to life-saving harm reduction alternatives unduly restricted.” (Cambridge LLP, 2017, p. 10)

Without actually using the term ‘harm reduction,’ this quote refers to the moral principles of non-judgement and individual risk reduction associated with this approach in medical ethics. Additionally, the comparison between smokers and injection drug users evokes the history of harm reduction and portrays vaping as a medical intervention that has “life-saving” potential.

Here, the law firm quoted above attempts to communicate the severity of regulatory restrictions to the vaping market by comparing smoking to dangerous drug injection practices, while comparing vaping to safer injection sites. Harm reduction has been used by other market actors, such as consumer advocacy groups and industry associations, to portray vaping as a life-saving measure in the face of the health risks of inhaling tar and other chemicals when tobacco is burnt, with less emphasis on the addictive risk of nicotine use. Harm reduction is thus based on a totally distinct set of moral values, namely non-judgement towards addictions and the reduction of risk for all no matter their consumption choices, compared to the purity discourse, which decries the use of or addiction to substances as a sign of moral and bodily pollution.

With the vaping industry's primary value proposition being nicotine delivery without the harms of combustion and smoke inhalation, the vaping market has become fractured due to competing moral discourses among those who believe all forms of nicotine ought to be avoided, and those who value harm reduction without shaming nicotine consumers. Conflicting moral values are apparent at the market level, but can also be seen at the individual level even among those who abide by a polarized viewpoint, such as the following tobacco control advocate who has worked tirelessly in support of market restrictions:

“Yes, I do believe - I *did* believe at some time it [vaping] was safer [than smoking]. That belief has been shaken. I'm not a scientist, you know, but I've learned to read scientific articles over time, and I sort of accepted everyone saying, well toxicants are lower [in vapes]. And then no one really knows how dangerous it is. And then even like, philosophically, well, if you don't know how dangerous it is, how can you say for certain that it's safer? So this will be a metaphor: jumping off of 17 floors is probably better than jumping off of 28. You know, at what point - how many stories is it safer to jump off of

before I really know that it is safer?” (Violet, tobacco control and anti-vaping advocate)

As a tobacco control advocate, and a vocal endorser of restrictions to the production of vapes and consumers’ access to them, Violet believes in the purity narrative wherein nicotine consumption in any form is as risky as jumping out of a building. She acknowledges that vaping, or “jumping off of 17 floors,” might indeed cause less individual health risks than smoking, or “jumping off of 28.” Yet, she casts doubt on the claim that vaping is “safer” for consumers than smoking due to her belief that safety is the elimination of danger, rather than the reduction of it. While she makes allowance for research suggesting that vaping does not carry the same individual health risks as smoking, she questions the moral integrity of the harm reduction discourse by pointing out that its proponents seem to endorse the continued endangerment of consumers. Her acknowledgement of the reduced individual risks associated with vaping while also questioning the moral integrity of harm reduction proponents demonstrates how market actors internalize and attempt to navigate competing moral discourses within a market. Like others, Violet demonstrates a post-truth subjectivity characterized by deep mistrust of her opponents and confusion about competing information that continually emerges from various sources. She occupies a polarized position characterized by activism against the vaping market and seeks to undermine the moral integrity of opposing actors who appeal to the discourse of harm reduction. Just as post-truth conditions like mistrust and polarization influence how Violet navigates the competing moral discourses within this market, post-truth conditions also expand the impact of competing moral discourses at the market-level. Mistrust among market actors primes their suspicion of one another’s moral claims and encourages the proponents of each moral discourse to undermine the integrity of the proponents of the other. The post-truth subjectivity also pushes market actors towards polarization, so they justify their position by

distinguishing themselves as much as possible from their opponents and by asserting moral superiority over opposing viewpoints rather than seeking common ground. Overall, market contestation will thrive in a market that is susceptible to post-truth conditions, which work to amplify the confusion and hostility among market actors caused by competing moral discourses.

2.2 Epistemic Contestation

Post-truth conditions fuel contestation when competing discourses of knowledge exist in a susceptible market. In the post-truth era, the fragmentation of shared knowledge and the breakdown of social trust leads to an ever-growing number of truth claims and self-proclaimed truth-tellers. Despite the plethora of competing truth claims, social power continues to inform which truth-tellers have an audience and which do not. Robertson and colleagues (Robertson, 2021; Robertson & Amarasingam, 2022) build on Foucault's (1970) concept of epistemes (defined as "systems in which power and knowledge are combined" (Robertson & Amarasingam, 2022, p. 195)), and Bourdieu's work on symbolic capital ("the ultimate basis of power through which field participants impose their vision of the way in which a field should be organized and the hierarchy of power effective in it" (De clerq & Voronov, 2009, p. 405)), to propose the concept of *epistemic capital*. Epistemic capital describes the power that social agents can acquire to shape influential knowledge in society. Prior to the post-truth era, traditional knowledge institutions, such as news media, government, experts, and religious figures, were considered *epistemic authorities*, public figures or institutions that are trusted by society to produce truthful information (Knaack & Gruin, 2021). Post-truth conditions thus lead to epistemic contestation in a susceptible market in two ways. First, the normalization of competing truth claims exacerbates competition over epistemic capital. This leads to divergent discourses of the purpose and primary functions of the market, resulting in market category confusion. Second,

mistrust and polarization among market actors obscure stakeholders' ability to find common ground. This leads opposing market actors to focus on undermining each other's epistemic authority rather than noticing similarities in their convictions, resulting in continued contestation despite potential avenues for agreement.

Competing epistemic discourses can be seen in the distinct truth claims about the vaping market that are promoted by health experts, tobacco control groups, and government authorities as compared to those promoted by pro-vaping consumer advocacy groups and industry associations. Epistemic contestation in a post-truth market leads to market category confusion, when there is a failure of consensus among market actors over the purpose and category of the market. In other words, there is a total lack of agreement across or within these opposing camps as to the desired function of the vape market.

Broadly, the categorical characterization of the nicotine vaping market is represented by two market category discourses. The first discourse suggests that nicotine vaping is a medical market intended to help adult smokers recover completely from nicotine use or as a nicotine replacement therapy, much like nicotine gum or patches, for adult smokers who do not wish to stop consuming nicotine. This discourse emerged earlier in the market's history, and formed the value proposition given by Hon Lik, the pharmacist who invented the modern e-cigarette, in 2003. Lik was driven to invent the e-cigarette after losing his father to lung cancer and finding little success in his own attempts to quit smoking using conventional nicotine replacement therapies. (The second discourse considers vaping as a recreational market, and this has emerged more recently both among vaping hobbyists and anti-vaping advocates. These discourses are not inherently contradictory, as other pharmaceutical substances have been adopted into recreational substance use (e.g., dextromethorphan abuse or 'Nyquil high') and vice versa (e.g., medical

cannabis, therapeutic ketamine infusions). However, in the context of nicotine vaping these narratives carry incongruent underlying epistemic implications for what ought to be considered the purpose and category of the commercial vaping market, and together contribute to market category confusion (Durand & Khaire, 2017).

To demonstrate how competing epistemic discourses perpetuate market category confusion, consider the example of one polarizing topic within the vaping market: whether flavored vaping products are part of a recreational or a medical market. On the one hand, pro-vaping advocates see vaping as a medical market for either smoking cessation, or those who wish to consume nicotine in a way that is safer than cigarette smoking. Proponents of vaping further suggest that it has the potential to improve population health outcomes by reducing smoking rates, as well as reducing smoking-related illnesses among those who wish to continue consuming nicotine. Based on this epistemic discourse of vaping as a medical market, consumers and pro-vaping advocates argue that flavored products offer a sensory experience that is an effective substitute to the smell and taste experience of smoking cigarettes:

“The ones [adult smokers] that switched to tobacco flavour [vapes] usually would do vaping and smoking side by side, before they switched to vaping [only]. But the ones that actually enjoyed the flavours would switch to vaping directly and smoke less and less. They would actually quit, like I did, immediately. Now the government is banning the flavours. Only the tobacco flavours are allowed. So it's one step back for the vapers. And it's going to make quitting smoking harder.” (Frank, former smoker and current vape consumer)

Proponents of vaping argue that flavored products are not contradictory with a medical market, but that enjoyable flavors offer a sensory experience that entices smokers to completely

quit cigarettes and switch to vaping, a supposedly safer nicotine delivery method. Moreover, consumers like Frank see themselves as alienated from epistemic authorities such as government and health experts due to an inherited stigma towards their past cigarette consumption, and the enduring stigma towards nicotine use. On the other hand, tobacco control groups, health experts, and government authorities view flavored nicotine products as part of a recreational market that needs to be more tightly regulated. Anti-vaping advocates find it ludicrous to suggest that flavored vape products are designed as part of a medical market for adult smokers. This is not because they think adults don't like flavored products, but because of a belief that sensory pleasure is incompatible with a pharmaceutical or medical product. Instead, anti-vaping advocates hold the epistemic belief that sensory pleasure is a characteristic of recreational markets rather than medical markets:

“I find it fascinating to look back at how those flavours were marketed, it wasn't just ‘marshmallow flavour,’ it was like ‘sparkly unicorn marshmallow.’ When I started researching this, when I came to [health advocacy organization] in the fall of 2017, we had started to do advocacy around these products. I was learning, I was new to the sector and as I was Googling and researching, one of the first flavours that came up in my Google searches was ‘sour Skittle’ flavoured vape juice. And I found it fascinating because I had spent that previous summer being pestered by my seven-year-old for sour Skittles all summer. I don't know what was going on in the seven-year-old world, but anytime we went into a store he wanted sour Skittles. And so for me to be going from the seven-year-old screaming for sour Skittles, to reading about how you could order a sour Skittles flavoured vape juice - I don't know how they don't understand that we're making a connection there. Especially because of how they were marketed. And you still see the

manufacturers resisting, you know, when there were limits placed so you can't call them 'Raspberry Slam' or whatever, you just have to call it like 'Berry Flavor' and you still see them marketing these, trying their best to subvert those regulations around what they can call these flavours. So if you're telling me that it is really just about adult users, then why do you need to call it 'glitter unicorn' flavour?" (Edith, health advocate)

This view of the nicotine vaping market is part of an epistemic discourse that considers vaping to be a recreational market, with anti-vaping advocates like Edith pointing to flavored vaping products as evidence of recreational consumption. This view considers vapes to be a 'gateway' designed by industry actors to lure young people into nicotine consumption:

"We recognize that youth are vaping because it's a recreational activity as opposed to something to get off of tobacco. So we're not big fans of youth vaping. We're very much supportive of endeavours to move vaping out of the hands of kids. So looking at policies like age 21 [limit], those sorts of things make good sense to us. There is evidence to support the notion that people who have never vaped or kids who have never vaped before, who then started vaping, over a period of time can become dual users of vaping and tobacco. And we certainly don't want to see a new generation of tobacco smokers, which gets us into a much bigger picture when you're looking at tobacco companies and their approach to buying vape companies, recruiting them to make technology. What that's *really* about for them. So anything we can do to keep vaping out of youth's hands is probably a good thing." (Robert, tobacco control advocate)

Robert questions the integrity of the medical market discourse by suggesting that the vaping market serves the interests of tobacco companies, the largest of which (such as Imperial Tobacco) have acquired many independent vaping companies, so that Big Tobacco now has

mutual financial interests in both the cigarette market as well as the vaping market. By mentioning the business practices of tobacco companies that have entered the vaping industry, Robert attempts to lend his own view of the truth, namely that flavored vapes are an industry attempt to introduce youth to nicotine, more epistemic authority by undermining the legitimacy of the opposing discourse that vaping is “something to get off of tobacco.”

Similarly, another tobacco control advocate undermined the epistemic authority of her opponents, pro-vaping advocates, by pointing out ideological inconsistencies in the harm reduction justification of the medical market discourse:

“I’ll give you an example of where the kind of commercial part, I mean, I’m not - who’s opposed to harm reduction? Harm reduction is a good idea. No one wants to put addicts in jail and so forth. But I would say that de-commercializing harm reduction is an approach that should be taken. And the current approach to vaping relied on the marketplace delivering a better outcome. And it reflected a kind of a neoliberal approach to the role of the marketplace, as opposed to a more precautionary one that was based on, well, you might want to have public daycare, or public hospital [compared to] a privately managed hospital, because you’ll have a different outcome if your water supply is done by a commercial operator than if it’s done by government. So I would apply the same thing to addictive drugs, just like I wouldn’t want to see methadone provided by commercial actors. I would like to see the tobacco business, the management of this addiction and the harm it causes, addressed within the public sphere.” (Violet, tobacco control and anti-vaping advocate)

While Robert echoes the narrative that sensory pleasure makes flavored vaping a recreational consumption practice rather than a health intervention for smoking cessation, Violet

adds deeper insights into the epistemic basis of this discourse among tobacco control advocates. She argues that if the vaping market is truly intended to offer a health intervention for smokers, then it ought to be removed from the commercial sector and incorporated into Canada's public healthcare system to remain ideologically consistent with other health services in Canada. Notably, other nicotine replacement therapies are privately produced and purchased at the user's expense, but sold in pharmacies and sometimes requiring prescriptions from a medical practitioner. Violet argues that for vaping to be viewed as a health practice rather than a recreational one, it ought to be controlled by the public sector, in alignment with Canada's social democratic values, rather than by the private sector. Her perspective is based on the same mistrust that Robert expresses towards tobacco companies. Her statements demonstrate an attempt to compete for epistemic capital by portraying the opposing, pro-vape narratives as inconsistent with dominant social values, which in this case are Canada's social democratic values towards healthcare. Similar strategies of undermining and highlighting inconsistencies in the opposing discourse are used by pro-vaping advocates and consumers.

Social mistrust contributes to epistemic contestation by making it difficult for market actors to believe that they share any of the same views as their opponents. For example, pro-vaping consumers align themselves with the harm reduction discourse, especially when they have first-hand knowledge of vaping as a helpful tool for smoking cessation. Health Canada also has stated in public announcements and reports that it considers harm reduction to be a real, potential benefit of vaping (Health Canada, 2022). However, consumer advocacy groups mistrust Health Canada due to its simultaneous promotion of the youth protection discourse. Additionally, Health Canada's tighter restrictions on the production and sale of vaping products appear to pro-vaping groups as threats to consumers' access to vaping products. Despite the shared agreement

between pro-vaping advocates and Health Canada that the vaping market offers harm reduction benefits to smokers who wish to quit, pro-vaping advocates overlook this epistemic common ground due to the post-truth condition of mistrust. Similarly, many pro-vaping advocates agreed with elements of the youth protection discourse endorsed by their opponents. For example, Carson expressed frustration that JUUL (large producer of pod-based vapes), which has now been shown to advertise specifically to young people (Larson & Nayak, 2023), was continuing to operate in Canada by supporting efforts to ban flavored vapes:

“It was in the media that JUUL was in favour of a flavour ban. I don't know if I ever saved the article. I was so outraged when I read it, you know. So when JUUL is asking the Canadian government, ‘wipe out this grassroots industry and give it all to us,’ which is partly what they did in the States. So when I read this, you know, I sent an email to my member of parliament saying, look at the evidence. JUUL's the one that created this problem. You know, JUUL has marketed directly at teenagers. These are well-established facts. Why is JUUL even still in business in this country if we're fighting a youth vaping epidemic, why is the company that created the problem even still on the map?” (Carson, former smoker and current vape consumer)

As discussed earlier, tobacco control advocates perceive epistemic inconsistencies among pro-vaping consumers, like Carson, who promote the harm reduction discourse and believe that sensory pleasure can make a medical market more effective. Those tobacco control advocates promote the youth protection discourse and attempt to undermine the harm reduction discourse by pointing out what they believe to be such inconsistencies. Carson's quote, however, shows that while he is staunchly pro-vaping, he also feels concern over youth vaping and deeply mistrusts corporations that market vaping to youth. Despite these shared views between a pro-

vaping consumer and tobacco control advocates, they are each part of increasingly polarized groups of market actors. While they have some potential common ground and points of epistemic agreement, post-truth conditions such as mistrust and polarization push them into further epistemic competition.

Mistrust pushes market actors further into polarized positions of asserting the epistemic strength of their own discourse, while undermining and attacking opposing discourses. This creates a social battleground for a growing number of truth-tellers to compete for power to shape the purpose and categorization of the affected market, where “different types of knowledge claims are mobilized by actors in competition for the epistemic capital of the field of knowledge in different ways” (Robertson & Amarasingam, 2022, p. 195). Opposing actors thus experience further polarization as they attempt to assert epistemic capital and to undermine their opponents’ epistemic authority, leading to epistemic contestation of the market. The two parties’ inability to align the other’s actions with their stated purpose fuels the pervasive mistrust and polarization between them. Importantly, the holders of each perspective cannot envision a reality where both their beliefs and their opponents’ beliefs can both represent truth; their epistemic viewpoints are presumed to be mutually exclusive. The ensuing polarization between anti-vaping and pro-vaping advocates can thus be traced to fundamentally distinct discourses of truth and competition over epistemic capital, where each polarized group attempts to gain a platform and an audience for its own set of truth claims. Post-truth conditions act upon susceptible markets to intensify competition between opposing actors for epistemic capital, thus leading to epistemic contestation as competing truth claims multiply and opposing actors grow increasingly mistrustful and polarized. Market contestation then leads to market category confusion when competing epistemic discourses attempt to shape the purpose and goals of the market.

Table 4. *Market actors' beliefs in others' ulterior motives*

According to [Actor 1]	Actor 2	Stated aims of Actor 2	The “actual” aims of Actor 2 according to Actor 1	Supporting quotes
Tobacco control advocates	Consumer advocacy groups	Say they represent consumer interests	Support the interests of the vape industry	“But if you look at some of the protests and who they are, the money that goes into these protests versus the amount of actually real people that turn out for them. There's another demonstration, November 23rd in Ottawa. And last, there was one in August 18th. I went down and observed it. People have been trucked in from all over Canada, Ontario, and Quebec. There were maybe a hundred people, you know, 105 or think is what I counted. No. That that's a, and there was big money behind it, you know, especially designed bus, everything else. That money comes from somewhere.” (Tobacco control advocate)
		Say they represent consumer interests	Support the interests of Big Tobacco	“The consumer groups, you know, Rights for Vapers is, is, I don't know if you've is, uh, um, a device created by tobacco companies and it is funded.” (Tobacco control advocate)
	Vape industry advocates	Say they fight for harm reduction to help smokers quit	Want smokers to continue nicotine consumption (profit motive)	“Now, it's okay, well, we're not, we can't make cigarettes safer. We can't fool them into thinking that cigarettes are safer. We don't want to stop selling cigarettes. We don't want to stop just our clients. So we have to do something else to show that we're on the side of the angels. And now vaping products is the thing.” (Tobacco control advocate)
	Health experts/ Science	Claim evidence is neutral and objective	Their recommendations are not based on transparent or believable reasoning	“They knew people coughed and so forth and, uh, we'll put filters on it and then filters became clean and there were a lot of ads, doctors recommend, even - this was even before the cancer link was well established and then moved to light cigarettes” (Tobacco control advocate)

	Government	Claim to make regulations based on evidence/science	Their recommendations are not based on transparent or believable reasoning	“They [UK Government] said vapes are 95% safer [than smoking] and you peel that back. How did you get to that? Put a bunch of people in a room and they thought, ‘yeah, 95%.’ It was a stab in the dark, but then they promoted it.” (Tobacco control advocate)
	Online consumer groups	Views purported to be by consumers	Too ideologically homogenic to really represent consumer views; likely just a front for industry or other agendas	“And then there's also, I think, manipulated narrative that's going on. And so I had to follow the, um, the Reddit and the Twitter verse and the hostility in it creates a kind of deliberate bias. Like there's something going on. It's not just people saying, “oh, I used this vape and it really works for me.” It's like "they're out to get us. Like we have to really...” (Tobacco control advocate)
	Large vape corporations (producers of proprietary closed pod systems)	Say that vapes are for adult smokers	Make vape flavours that are attractive to/ targeted at youth and children	“Like I find it fascinating because again, to look back, to look at how those were marketed, those flavors, it wasn't just marshmallow flavor. It was like sparkly, unicorn, marshmallow...” (Tobacco control advocate)
		Say that vapes are a safer alternative to smoking and intend to help smokers quit smoking	Vape companies have been merged/acquired by Big Tobacco, which only cares about keeping people addicted to nicotine	“If you look at their [tobacco corporations] own explanations to shareholders, they are into expanding their product base in two ways: one, cigarettes are a slowly diminishing category, so they can retain nicotine consumers by having alternative nicotine products and two, they can expand the market and they can - new users are not going to cigarettes, new users are going towards these other products. So they want alternative nicotine products in order to maintain the nicotine business and refresh it.” (Tobacco control advocate)
Vape consumer groups	Tobacco control advocates	Claim they are against tobacco consumption and they want to	Working against adult smokers	“You know Smoke-Free Physicians, they've gone off the deep end. They're not even focusing on smokers. They're focusing on people not having access to vaping products. So now when we see all these campaigns that are being headed about against kids, they're not facts. They're not based on fact, they're based on fear, but they're

		protect youth from vaping		using the same tools that they tried to use with smokers.” (Consumer group advocate)
Health Canada		Say they represent consumer interests	Support the interests of Tobacco Control and health advocacy groups	“Yeah, but you know what? The Cancer Society, Heart and Stroke [Foundation], even Health Canada, they did a really good job of making sure people were just as shamed for vaping as they were for smoking.” (Consumer group advocate)
		Say they represent consumer interests	Work for the benefit of Big Pharma	“Pharma has the biggest thing to lose from my understanding. Health Canada is now funded 90% by pharmaceutical companies.” (Consumer group advocate)
Large vape corporations (producers of proprietary closed pod systems)		Say they make vapes to help smokers quit smoking	Pander to opponents just to stay in business, even supporting policies that affect vapers	But JUUL sent out a press release in April of last year, that stated that they were getting out of flavors. And that to me was the worst thing that they ever did because their products worked because of their four flavors. And one kid likes cucumber, like whatever, but they got out of their flavors. And that was when I realized they're citing. But they're also very wholly owned by a tobacco company,” (Consumer group advocate)
Vape industry advocates	Tobacco control advocates	Claim they are against tobacco consumption	Making it harder for smokers to quit smoking, by opposing and restricting access to vape products	Vape industry advocate: I would suggest to you that no one cares about the health outcomes of people. Interviewer: Even the health advocacy groups you would say VIA: Specifically.
		Claim they want to protect youth from becoming addicted	By restricting access to vapes, pushing curious youth to cigarettes instead	“That, you know, the youth use and everything like that, what they don't celebrate is that less than 5% of youth use smoking products and Canada, less than 5% of kids smoke. And that that's a huge stumper. That's a huge whip for them. There are like 4.2% of youth smoking Canada, but now they're worried about vaping. So anyways, I guess tobacco control needs a job, right?” (Vape industry advocate)

Health Canada	Say they represent consumer interests	Support the interests of Tobacco Control Advocates	<p>Vape industry advocate: So I used to have quarterly meetings with Health Canada. I absolutely refuse to do it now.</p> <p>Interviewer: Really. What changed?</p> <p>VIA: They don't engage. They don't answer anything because their agenda is pre-set. So what the fuck is the point?</p> <p>Interviewer: Okay. The agenda being preset by...who do you think?</p> <p>VIA: I have two things I can guarantee you. This is not being driven by pharma or being driven by big tobacco. You can take them off your list of things to go after, because. I know those guys. And like I said, I worked at Shoppers' [Drug Mart]. Well, I know the executives that all those companies, they're not the concern. I talk to big tobacco all the time, even though I don't get funding or a dime from those guys, um, uh, which is important to the, to the narrative. Um, it's also important for moral reasons, right. Uh, but. It's Heart and Stroke, The Cancer [Foundation], and Physicians for a Smoke-Free, that's it.</p>
Large vape corporations (producers of proprietary closed pod systems)	Say that vapes are for adult smokers	Make vape flavours that are attractive to/ targeted at youth and children	<p>"JUUL's almost done in Canada. I don't project that they'll be around in our nation within six to 12 months, they're gone. And even if you look at their office, they're down to three employees in Canada. And you can tell... I am not a fan of that particular corporation. So that's why we supported no advertising to youth and the lifestyle shit like that, right? It has to go." (Vape industry advocate)</p>
	Say they make vapes to help smokers quit smoking	Support the interests of Big Tobacco	<p>"So all the advertising, everything from the big tobacco brands, so on and so forth came in as soon as the TVPA came in. So you had this cottage industry, helping people get off smoking that big business came in and I'm talking billion dollar business, not right." (Vape industry advocate)</p>

Consumers	Tobacco control advocates	Claim they want to protect youth from becoming addicted	By restricting access to vapes, pushing curious youth to cigarettes instead	<p>“But we do have peer pressure for kids to smoke. I know because that's how I got into cigarettes. There is obviously going to be peer pressure for kids to vape instead because vaping's more readily available at mom and dad shops. Cigarettes are still available, but vaping is something that's safer that you can do.”</p> <p>(Consumer, current vaper and former smoker)</p>
	Government / Health Canada	Say they represent consumer interests	Acting against the best interests of adult vapers	<p>“Now the government is trying to make the flavors illegal. So on the 22nd of November, I'm actually catching a bus to go to Ottawa and I'm joining a protest because I believe it's wrong.</p> <p>(Consumer, current vaper and former smoker)</p>
		Say they are trying to protect youth from vaping	Push adult vapers back to smoking	<p>“The ones [smokers] that switched to tobacco [flavored vapes] usually would do vaping and smoking side by side, before they switched to vaping [only], the ones that actually enjoyed the flavor would switch to vaping directly and smoke less and less. They would actually quit, like I did, immediately. Now the government is banning the flavors. Only the tobacco flavors are allowed. So it's one step back for the vapers. And it's going to make quitting smoking harder.”</p> <p>(Consumer, current vaper and former smoker)</p>
		Say they are trying to protect youth from vaping	Push adult vapers back to smoking	<p>Consumer (current vaper and former smoker): Yeah especially having to lower the nicotine level. I bought so many of like the 50 milligrams right before the cut off. Like I am legitimately worried what I'm going to do when those run out.</p> <p>Interviewer: And why is that? Because I think now the max is 20, right?</p> <p>Consumer: Yeah. It's such a small amount. My biggest worry about that is potentially going back to smoking, as much as I don't like it. If I need, you know, a certain level of nicotine to satisfy the craving, like what's going to happen when I do go down to a 20 milligram, will I have</p>

to, like, I don't know, vape more than I already do? Will I have to do both like smoking cigarettes and vaping?"

Large vape corporations (producers of proprietary closed pod systems)

Say they make vapes to help smokers quit smoking

Pander to opponents just to stay in business, even supporting policies that affect vapers

“It was in the media, like JUUL was behind - it's in favor of a flavor ban. And, you know, I was so outraged when I read it, you know, like JUUL went to the Canadian government, said ‘we have a better plan for the vaping industry.’ So when JUUL is asking the Canadian government "wipe out this grassroots industry and give it all to us", which is partly what they did in the States. So when I read this, you know, I sent an email to my member of parliament saying, look at the evidence. JUUL's the one that created this problem. You know, JUUL has marketed directly at teenagers. These are well-established facts. Why is JUUL even still in business in this. If we're fighting a youth vaping epidemic, why is the company that created the problem even still on the map?” **(Consumer, current vaper and former smoker)**

3 Consumer Responses to Post-Truth Markets

In this section, I introduce three dimensions of consumer responses to a market that has been influenced by post-truth conditions: alternate truth-seeking, entrepreneurship, and activism. Consumers in my sample responded to differing extents along these dimensions, reflecting the variance in how post-truth subjectivity impacts consumer attitudes and behavior. All but one participant shared lived experiences of successfully quitting smoking by using vapes, and this is a narrative that is sidelined by health advocates' and the government's efforts to restrict the production and sale of vapes due to narratives of risk and fears of a youth vaping epidemic. For these consumers, the contradiction between calls to restrict the vaping market and their own positive experiences with vaping contributes to a growing mistrust in the purported reasons for government intervention in the market. Additional quotes in support of these themes can be found in Appendix B.

3.1 Alternate Truth-Seeking

The lived experience of pro-vaping consumers contradicts messages from public health authorities, medical experts, and tobacco control advocates who describe vaping in terms of risks akin to smoking. This contradiction reflects the post-truth condition of conflicting truth claims and reinforces consumers' drive to seek knowledge that resonates with their personal experience. Consumers seek alternative knowledge in two ways: first, they engage with relational knowledge sources, such as online consumer groups and advocacy groups; second, they attend to their individual perceptions, including emotions and embodied experiences, as reliable sources of knowledge.

3.1.1 *Relational Knowledge*

In the face of moral and epistemic contestation, consumers attempt to make meaning of competing discourses by “doing their own research,” a refrain that was echoed by several consumers in my sample. The process of doing one’s own research was not an individual experience, but a relational process of sharing alternative information sources with others grappling with the same contradictory narratives. Specifically, consumers sought alternative sources of truth by connecting with other vapers and pro-vaping advocates through online communities, wherein alternative media and information sources were shared among users. For example, one consumer shared how his opinion on nicotine changed when he found alternative resources on the topic:

“All my health issues were well before I started vaping. So it was constant preaching by a cardiologist to get off the cigarettes. You know, people would tell you that nicotine is as bad as heroin and I need to get off of it. And it wasn't until after the fact [starting vaping], a year and a half or two years, and I'm struggling with this [quitting vaping] when I finally read this scientific study and watched a documentary called ‘*You Don't Know Nicotine*,’ it was an excellent documentary. That’s when I realized, okay, well maybe this isn't quite so bad after all. It's a chemical. I guess ideally we wouldn't put this in our body, but nicotine is a stimulant on par with caffeine, the cup of coffee that I drink every day, and I don't see society going berserk over banning coffee. So, you know, where's the truth?” (Carson, former smoker and current vape consumer)

This quote captures how alternative information sources (“scientific study” and “documentary”) play a role in consumers’ meaning-making process in a post-truth market affected by moral contestation. Carson first establishes his position that vaping as a practice is no more harmful than cigarettes by asserting that his health concerns existed while he smoked and

were not caused by vaping. When he described his cardiologist's entreaties to cease smoking, he suggests that he took these warnings to mean he ought to quit nicotine consumption in all forms, including vaping. He refers to the moral discourse of substance use as pollution when he describes the social belief that "nicotine is as bad as heroin," an illegal and highly addictive substance with much stronger mind-altering properties than nicotine. Describing nicotine and heroin as similar reduces their substantial differences in effects and legality to a shared characteristic of being addictive substances. Carson re-affirms the purity discourse when he says, "ideally we wouldn't put this in our body," echoing the narrative that a pure body is one free from substance use. A transformative moment occurred for Carson when he read an article and watched a documentary, both indicative of his alternate truth-seeking, that portray nicotine as a harmless "stimulant on par with caffeine," a much more socially accepted substance compared to heroin. With this more reassuring comparison between nicotine and caffeine, he expresses confusion over the social stigma towards the former when the latter is normalized and widely consumed, and this confusion is a hallmark of the consumer experience when navigating competing moral discourses. His concluding sentence captures how consumers in a market that is impacted by post-truth conditions genuinely seek trustworthy, truthful information, but instead are met with a plethora of competing claims that have very different consequences for regulatory policies and individual decision-making.

Faced with confusion and competing claims, consumers who are alienated from mainstream dialogue flock to online communities, which become spaces for meaning making and the sharing of alternative information resources. Importantly, these online communities become an arena for truth seeking and knowledge creation in the face of increasing regulatory

restrictions and anti-vaping discourses. For example, Carson also described how he has found a community in virtual spaces:

“I don't know that many people that vape. I'd probably still know more people, you know, more smokers than I do people that vape. And I find it frustrating when vaping and smoking got lumped together under provincial legislation, because smokers tell me that I'm doing a bad thing and not to vape in their smoke areas. Okay. So I don't know where - like the social thing for me is online, between a couple of forums on Reddit and Discord, which is a chat server. That's where I find more social interaction there than I do going out.” (Carson, former smoker and current vape consumer)

Carson's experience of being shunned by smokers demonstrates a belief among some that the unknown risks of vaping are more fearsome than the known risks of smoking. In addition to feeling misrepresented by mainstream discourses of vaping, consumers who used vaping to quit smoking felt doubly alienated among both smokers and non-smokers. Many vapers like Carson have meaningful personal narratives of vaping as a transformative practice that was the only method that allowed them to quit smoking after years of trying other methods to no avail. Harsin (2018a, p. 3) argues that under post-truth conditions, “‘popular’ conceptions of reality have become confusing or suspicious because of the saturation of reality representation with games of expertly researched and thus exclusive strategic deception—of pan-partisan nature.” Among vaping consumers, mainstream truth-tellers, such as news media and health experts, are no more trustworthy than alternate truth-tellers, and online communities offer a space where consumers can sift through competing truth claims (regardless of source) with the help of others who are similarly alienated by mainstream discourses of vaping.

The discourses reproduced in vaping online spaces include narratives of deception by authorities, specifically beliefs that Health Canada has sinister agendas and that Big Tobacco funds various, competing market actors. For example, a key controversy that has shaped the nicotine vaping market occurred due to reports that vaping manufacturers such as JUUL advertised and promoted their products towards a younger, non-smoking generation using the same tactics that had been used to sell cigarettes decades earlier (Committee on Energy and Commerce, 2013). In 2018, Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Commissioner Scott Gottlieb issued a statement calling teenage vaping an “epidemic” and urged the vaping industry to address the problem or risk having their flavored products pulled from the market (FDA, 2018). However, vaping consumers in my sample who were active in online communities shared a powerful narrative that the supposed youth vaping epidemic is, in fact, disinformation. Sybil, a young person who was successfully able to quit smoking with the help of vapes, confided the following:

“There has been, you know, this sort of discussion, which I kind of kind of believe, that they want to get rid of these high levels [of nicotine in vapes]. Mostly I feel like it's sort of - it sounds so stupid - they sort of want people to go back to smoking. I feel like there's so much money in buying cigarettes. I feel like they just want to turn people back to that. I mean, they'll like talk about it, like, ‘oh, it's for the kids,’ but it's actually not.”
(Sybil, former smoker and current vape consumer)

The “discussion” that Sybil refers to is a discussion among consumers in online vaping communities. The trepidation she expresses when sharing her belief that an unknown “they” are acting against the best interests of consumer health and in the interests of the tobacco industry reveals a self-awareness that this belief sounds far-fetched. Despite her hesitant tone, Sybil

nonetheless engages with this alternative discourse of truth due to her confusion about the increase in regulatory restrictions when vaping was of personal benefit to her smoking cessation process. Her confusion over regulatory restrictions that seem to contradict her lived experience is compounded by her mistrust in the stated intentions of provincial regulators and Health Canada. Sybil's mistrust is a symptom of the broader phenomenon of society-wide mistrust that is a condition of the post-truth era (Harsin, 2018a), and so the "discussion" she references is positioned within an online space where this mistrust is shared and reinforced by other consumers. The belief in a sinister agenda that pushes for regulatory restrictions on the vaping market to make those who quit smoking go back to cigarettes is a belief that was echoed by other consumers in my sample (see Table 4). This suggests that it is a powerful competing truth claim that is reproduced among those who feel misrepresented by, and mistrustful of, the dominant narrative of health risks and caution towards vaping.

3.1.2 *Embodied Knowledge*

In addition to seeking alternate truth in spaces such as online communities, consumers are also increasingly turning to the most verifiable source of knowledge, namely one's own perceptions. The fragmentation of trusted, communal knowledge sources and the increase in conflicting truth claims in the post-truth era leaves the post-truth subject mistrustful of any claim that cannot be personally verified, leading to a greater reliance on personal experience. Consumers rely on embodied knowledge to obtain a sense of truth, and their sensory, body-based experience strengthens their belief that vaping remains an effective and worthwhile smoking cessation practice:

"I had tried all these ways to quit smoking and I failed and this thing [vape pen], I just took one puff and that was it. I mean, it looked like smoking, and the motions were

exactly the same like smoking, when vapour came out of my mouth. So I didn't have to change anything. I just replaced smoking with something far less harmful and it was done so easy...I used to be a one pack a day smoker. I used to have the morning cough. I used to have the evening cough. I used to swim in a swimming team, and I stopped swimming. I stopped my regular jogs. I would cough a lot of brown stuff in the morning and in the evening. All that stuff. What is remarkable is since then [starting vaping], I'm jogging now. I'm swimming now. My breathing is normal. I actually took a lung capacity test for asthma, about six months ago. My lungs are completely normal, not even a smoker's normal. So that is remarkable.” (Anthony, former smoker and current vape consumer)

For consumers like Anthony who had attempted to quit smoking using other nicotine replacement therapies without success, vaping was effective for smoking cessation because of the sensory similarities between it and smoking. As Anthony describes it, “the motions were exactly the same” and the sensory experience of inhaling and exhaling vapor mimicked smoking in a way that made it an effective alternative to cigarettes. Anthony's narrative of transformative healing, where vaping allowed his lungs to recover to a point of undoing the damage caused by several decades of smoking, is one that was echoed by other participants:

“But truth be told, even in my short time of vaping, I noticed the difference in how I was feeling immediately. When I smoked cigarettes, I'll be honest with you, there'd be times when I'm on my eighth one, near the end of the day and I'm like, ‘This sucks, dude. Like, this is terrible.’ And I feel dehydrated and I have acid reflux and stuff like that. But I could get the same amount of nicotine by vaping and not have that [experience]. Not quite as much. Obviously, the difference is like your lungs feel kind of wet-ish [when vaping], but I'd rather have that than that nasty, smoky, tarry kind of feeling.” (Joseph,

former smoker and vape consumer)

“The biggest thing that I noticed [after switching to vaping] was I didn't feel shitty in the sense of, I didn't wake up in the morning and just feel gross. Or if I smoked too many cigarettes, I would just feel disgusting. Especially if I was drinking and I would smoke too many and the next day I'd wake up and be like, oh yeah, I do not feel good. With vaping, I don't get that at all.” (Sybil, former smoker and current vape consumer)

Each of these quotes is a testimony to the power and impact of the knowledge participants gained by observing how their bodies reacted to vaping compared to smoking. Joseph had completely quit vaping and smoking and was nicotine-free at the time of the interview. Sybil had totally replaced smoking with vaping at the time of our interview. Both of these participants spoke about vaping as a practice that improved their health, not simply as a projection of the long-term health benefits of smoking cessation, but as a transformative experience of feeling significantly better *while* vaping compared to smoking. The narrative of transformative healing is key because it is based on personal, lived experience, which the post-truth subject has come to rely on considering the deep mistrust in traditional knowledge sources and the presence of many conflicting truth claims. Owing to a sense of alienation from authorities and betrayal by experts, consumers resort to feeling their way to some semblance of ‘truth,’ reflecting what Harsin (2018b, p.45) calls emo-truth, that is “truth where emotion serves as inference (prime or indexical sign, emotional or unconscious affective response, and presto: truth).” The notion of emo-truth suggests that widespread suspicion and mistrust leave post-truth subjects to navigate conflicting truth claims based on their emotional resonance. In a market where truth claims are suspected and authoritative knowledge sources are no longer trusted, all

subjects become truth-tellers. Like “citizen journalism,” the phenomenon whereby open access to information and publishing platforms allow all members of society to act as journalists (Harsin, 2018a), the individualization of knowing in the post-truth era leads to as many truths as there are truth-tellers. Yet, there exist discursive patterns that shape common narratives shared by consumers and other market actors, indicating that despite the proliferation of truth-tellers, ideological discourses reproduce mistrust, competing truth claims, and polarization, thereby sustaining post-truth conditions.

3.2 Entrepreneurship

While seeking alternate truths was a common response among consumers whom I interviewed, a subset also demonstrated entrepreneurship. Drawing on the definition of entrepreneurship proposed by Howard Stevenson as “the pursuit of opportunity beyond resources controlled” (Eisenmann, 2013, p.1), I find that consumers who feel particularly afraid of regulatory restrictions on the production and sales of vaping products demonstrate entrepreneurial efforts to attempt to control their access to vaping supplies. The fear expressed by vaping consumers reflects a sense of powerlessness in the face of restrictive regulations that appear not to consider their positive, transformative experiences of vaping. In response, consumers attempt to store, source, and produce their own supplies as a way of reclaiming a sense of control over their consumption. For instance, Carson described a growing community of vapers who make their own do-it-yourself (DIY) e-juice in response to regulatory bans on flavored products:

“I understand that the state of Massachusetts went so far as to try banning the flavor concentrates that I use [in DIY e-juice]. That's already backfired on them because they come from the food industry. So you have to ban food to be able to ban the ingredients

that I use to make vape juice...But there's 68,000 people on one forum on Reddit called DIY E-juice. It's a dedicated forum to making e-juice and has 68,000 members. So, you know, this isn't small numbers and that grows every time there's another flavor ban."

(Carson, former smoker and current vape consumer)

By counterposing the creation of his own e-juice as a direct response to bans on flavored vaping products, Carson expresses a determination to circumvent "resources controlled" (Eisenmann, 2013) and continue consuming flavored e-juice. This speaks to self-reliance and agency over one's own consumption as the motivators behind entrepreneurial efforts by vaping consumers. Prior research suggests that DIY consumer practices might be motivated by efforts to individualize consumption and construct self-identity (Campbell, 2005; Moisio, Arnould, Gentry, 2013; Watson & Shove, 2008), or by the need to economize (Williams, 2008; Brodersen, 2003). While vapers who demonstrated entrepreneurship spoke about the cost-savings of making e-juice at home, and the pleasure of customizing their vaping experience by mixing flavors and building their own vaping devices, these were described as secondary advantages to the peace of mind of knowing their consumption could endure market restrictions. For example, Jimmy explained why he switched from proprietary pod-based vaping systems (such as JUUL) to open systems or rebuildable tank atomizers (RTAs):

"Well, that was my whole goal was to be able to make my own juice. This is all part of the same thing by doing my homework and figuring out what my options are. I'm determining my own - how vaping is going to work for me down the road. It's determining: how do I keep continuing to vape? And so I got into RTAs. I decided to go with them because the RTA provides me the ability to vape, regardless of what's available on the market here. But my goal was always to make my own juice and build

my own tanks. I'm an outdoorsman, bush craftsman. So like bushcraft, being able to do everything, like when I had my bow, I had a lightweight fletching tool that I could bring with me to the bush and make my own arrows. I knew that with my bow, even if I was lost in the bush and my bow string broke, I knew I could use a piece of paracord and what size to replace the bow string. It would not necessarily be as good, but it would allow me to kill an animal for either protection or food and keep me alive. That's my thinking as a bush craftsman, that if I can't keep this up, no matter where I am, if I can't use this to survive, if I don't have redundancies, then it's no good. And so if my vaping experience doesn't fit all those categories, I'm not a happy camper. And so I have to make sure that no matter what, I have options, right? So I learned, I made myself learn, despite the intimidating factor in all of this, there's so much knowledge.” (Jimmy, former smoker and current vape consumer)

Becoming self-reliant is the primary motivator for learning to mix e-liquid and build vaping devices, as exemplified by Jimmy’s quote. Notably, Jimmy describes his desired self-reliance by drawing parallels between vaping and bushcraft, which involves creative problem-solving and improvisation skills. Knowing not only how to use his bow, but also how to carve arrows and improvise solutions to a broken bowstring in the wilderness, are skills that Jimmy values for their ability to offer him “protection or food and keep [him] alive.” The image of the self-reliant outdoorsman echoes closely that of Richard Slotkin’s (2000) image of rugged individualism, whereby “the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual” thrives against all odds (Holt & Thompson, 2004). Indeed, Harsin (2020) notes the rise of rugged individualism as a consequence of post-truth conditions during a global crisis; he connects the COVID-19 “infodemic” to white heteromasculine rugged individualism by arguing that fragmented and

conflicting truth claims encouraged the resurgence of individual efforts towards self-reliance, individualism, and a view of nature (and society) as sources of threat to the aspiring survivor.

While it might seem drastic to compare vaping to outdoor survival, the comparison offers the insight that for many consumers who used vaping to quit smoking, vaping is more than a recreational consumption practice. Particularly for consumers who had struggled to quit smoking and succeeded only with the help of vaping, access to vaping products is seen as a life-or-death issue. For consumers who resort to entrepreneurship, there is an urgent need to protect one's access to vaping products in the face of regulatory restrictions. Mistrust in governments, and a foregrounding of mortality, are echoed in the following quote:

“The restrictions have always happened since I think that first one was 2016 or 2017. Since then every step the government has taken means - you know how many of these I have now? [Holds up his vape]. You know how many batteries I bought over a year? Because I'm so afraid at some point it's not going to be possible to purchase any of these [vapes]. I actually have a fridge in my garage just for my e-liquid and flavors because I'm afraid it's [production] going to be stopped. And I don't want to go back to smoking cigarettes. I don't. And it scares me because I started smoking in an Iranian prison. I was a political prisoner for a few years in Iran, so I associate that with very bad memories, nightmares that I still have. So I don't want to go back to that. But unless this kills more than cigarettes, I don't want to go back. So I make my own e-liquid, I'm making my own coils, pretty much self-sufficient here.” (Anthony, former smoker and current vape consumer)

A sense of determination to regain power over their consumption was communicated by participants who build, create, or stockpile vaping products. As noted by Anthony, fear is a key

emotion behind his stockpiling practices, mixing his own e-juice, and building his own vaping devices. Fear of governments and other authorities restricting one's consumption choices is a consequence of the political climate in which post-truth conditions emerged. Entrepreneurship among vaping consumers emerges directly from this fear. It is a bid to retain consumer agency in a post-truth market where the future appears uncertain due to powerful, untrusted actors competing to assert truth claims and to undermine one another. Fear, a powerful and mobilizing feeling, reinforces polarization at the market level (Mimoun et al. 2022), while at the consumer level, it offers a guide for decision making in a post-truth era.

3.3 Activism

Consumer activism combines three types of action: system-level advocacy efforts, changes to one's own consumption choices, as well as efforts to change other consumers' consumption choices (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). Vaping consumers engage primarily in the first type of action, namely system-level advocacy, including writing petitions, organizing protests, writing letters to elected officials, writing op-eds, and engaging in public consultations held by Health Canada. The purpose of consumer activism is to enact systemic, macro- and market-level changes (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Handelman & Fischer, 2018; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). While some consumers engaged in activism by organizing collective action, others took a less involved role yet still participated in activism by attending protests or volunteering for consumer advocacy groups:

“I've been very happy [since switching to vaping]. And now the government is trying to make the flavors illegal. So on the 22nd of November, I'm actually catching a bus to go to Ottawa to join a protest because I believe it's wrong.” (Anthony, former smoker and current vape consumer)

Consumers like Anthony expressed distress over regulatory restrictions of the market that are informed by narratives of consumption that do not align with such consumers' experiences. This distress is then channeled into participation in protest activities organized by consumer activist groups such as Rights4Vapers, which also organized a public event called 'Harm Reduction Day' during smoking-cessation week in March 2022. After first asking me to speak at that event, an invitation which I declined due to my non-partisan commitment as a researcher, the organizers of Rights4Vapers invited a set of speakers including a lawyer, two academic researchers, and several consumer advocates to speak on the potential consequences of proposed restrictions to the vaping market for smokers and vapers. One speaker was Marion Burt, a self-identified senior and consumer advocate:

“People in small towns where vape stores have shut down are left to their own devices....Seniors who vape are not having their voices heard. People advocating against vaping are young people who've never smoked or vaped.” (Marion, consumer advocate)

In her speech, Marion emphasized that the voices with the most power in contemporary public dialogue about vaping belong to those who have not experienced first-hand the benefits of switching to vaping from smoking. This narrative echoes the previously mentioned reliance on embodied, personal knowledge as more trustworthy than truth claims made by those without lived experience of nicotine use. By evoking the power of lived experience and accusing anti-vaping voices of lacking that experience, Marion positions herself and seniors like her, who lived through the era of cigarette normalization followed by public health messages shaming smokers, as forgotten voices whose health and personal interests are not “heard” by governments and health experts. The group that organized this event, Rights4Vapers, also organized the protest against flavor bans that Anthony mentioned above, and soon after this event, they began holding

online consumer support groups. In their monthly electronic newsletter, they also encouraged followers and supporters to contribute to a public consultation held by Health Canada regarding the proposed flavor bans (see Figure 2).

Consumers and advocates who participate in activism, like Anthony and Marion, expressed a feeling of marginalization from mainstream discourses around nicotine consumption broadly, and vaping specifically, a feeling that reflects the post-truth subjectivity, whereby individuals are left to navigate a fragmented market structure without being able to rely on trustworthy institutions. Some consumer activists, like Marion, internalized a strong feeling of marginalization from mainstream social discourses and authoritative knowledge institutions, and appeared more likely to participate in activism. Others, while expressing fear of market restrictions, did not internalize a sense of marginalization to a great degree, and were more likely to exhibit alternate truth-seeking but less likely to demonstrate entrepreneurship or activism. There is a conceptual link between stigma, marginalization, and perceived threat in a post-truth market. Prior literature suggests that stigma emerges as a response to collective threat (Heatherton, 2003), whereby those who threaten dominant group beliefs are stigmatized and outcast by the majority. Yet, those who are stigmatized also perceive threat in such a situation, and their response is often shaped by emotion discourse (Valor et al., 2021). In a post-truth market where the industry or its consumers have faced social stigma, authoritative restrictions, and betrayal by experts, stigmatized consumers perceive their consumption practices to be threatened and their identities to be marginalized, thus pushing them towards activism in a bid to protect their access to market services and products.

Figure 2. Screenshot of advocacy groups' efforts to make consumer participation in regulatory consultation more accessible.



Discussion

1 Overview of Findings

Using observational, archival and netnographic data, as well as in-depth interviews conducted with various stakeholders and consumers in the nicotine vaping market, this study has endeavored to answer three interrelated research questions: **First, why are some markets particularly susceptible to being impacted by post-truth conditions? Second, how are susceptible markets impacted by post-truth conditions? Third, how do consumers navigate markets impacted by post-truth conditions?** Three conditions are hallmarks of the post-truth era, namely widespread social mistrust, competing truth claims, and polarization (Harsin, 2018a). Before tackling the first research question, I argued that the nicotine vaping market has been inordinately impacted by the three post-truth conditions, and suggested that not all markets will be susceptible to post-truth conditions to the same degree as this particular market. I propose the term *post-truth markets* to describe markets that are highly susceptible to being impacted by post-truth conditions. In addressing the second and third research questions, I found that consumers and other market actors, including industry advocates, business owners, and health advocates, viewed each other and the vaping market through a subjective lens that was shaped by post-truth conditions, which I call a *post-truth subjectivity*. This is not unique to actors within a post-truth market, but is rather reflective of the over-arching cultural impact of post-truth conditions on all market actors.

To answer the first question, I drew upon historic and legislative archival data, as well as in-depth interviews with market actors, to propose three characteristics that make certain markets particularly susceptible to post-truth conditions: historical stigma, changes in expert opinions, and authority intervention to restrict market activities. When all three of these characteristics are present in a market, I posit that it will become a post-truth market. The second research question

was addressed by analyzing the competing discourses reiterated in legislative documents, advocacy group publications, and news media articles, as well as reproduced by the research participants. Based on this analysis, I theorize that post-truth markets experience both moral and epistemic contestation, where market actors reproduce competing discourses of moral value and epistemic authority, while perpetuating mistrust and suspicion of opponents' integrity. I argued that the dual presence of moral and epistemic contestation in a market not only reinforces post-truth conditions, but also creates issues such as market category confusion. Finally, analysis of consumer data from online support groups, consumer advocacy group publications, and consumer interviews offered insights for the third research question. I theorize that consumers draw upon three strategies to navigate a post-truth market, including seeking alternative truth sources, entrepreneurship (self-reliance), and engaging in activism.

2 Contributions to Prior Literature

2.1 Market Contestation

The findings of this study suggest that the vaping marketplace is a contested market, with active and ongoing discursive negotiations between a wide variety of market actors. Contestation has been shown to influence the macro-level trajectories of markets, specifically in terms of the growth and decline of established markets (Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015; Humphreys, 2010; Humphreys et al., 2016; Huff et al., 2021; Mimoun et al., 2022). Yet, prior research has not addressed the interplay between post-truth conditions and market contestation, nor has it examined how market contestation influences the micro-level experiences of consumers and other market actors. As the findings of this study demonstrate, post-truth conditions create two kinds of contestation in a susceptible market: moral and epistemic contestation. Moreover, this

study contributes insights into how market actors, including consumers, navigate moral and epistemic contestation in the marketplace.

The findings add to prior evidence for the moral bases of market contestation. Discourses that assert the moral superiority of a particular view of the market, as well as discourses that undermine the moral worth of opposing views, contribute to contestation in a market that is susceptible to post-truth conditions. Contestation on the basis of competing moral discourses has been noted by prior consumer research, including Mimoun and colleagues' (2022) study of the moral arguments underlying contestation of the fertility technology market, and Valor and colleagues' (2021) study of the moral concerns that drove contestation of the bullfighting industry.

While adding to the growing evidence for the important role of competing moral discourses in market contestation, this study also introduces the concept of epistemic contestation. Epistemic contestation was proposed by Robertson (2021) to capture “competition over epistemic capital” (Robertson & Amarasingam 2022, p. 194), namely the contemporary competition for the social power to produce knowledge that enjoys some degree of trust from a particular social audience. Based on the findings of this study, I argue that in markets that are susceptible to post-truth conditions, both moral and epistemic contestation emerge. In these post-truth markets, competition over epistemic capital can be seen in competing discourses of knowledge, where market actors seek to reinforce certain truth claims while undermining opponents' epistemic authority. Specifically, market actors reproduce not only the discourses in which they believe, but also discourses that portray their opponents as untrustworthy, dishonest, or ignorant. Epistemic contestation is equally about believing and promoting particular truth claims, as it is about ‘debunking’ and finding inconsistencies in competing truth claims. As such,

epistemic contestation is not only shaped by post-truth conditions (mistrust, competing truth claims, polarization), but also contributes to the reproduction of these conditions in a susceptible market. This increases the intensity of post-truth conditions within the meso-context of the susceptible market, which exists in a dialogical relationship within a macro-context of post-truth conditions at the social level and influences the micro-level experience of post-truth subjectivity among consumers and other market actors.

The growing body of literature on market contestation can thus be enriched by considering the roles of both moral and epistemic discourses as mechanisms for market contestation. Particularly as the post-truth era continues on, consumer research will benefit from considering how various symptoms of epistemic contestation might emerge especially in the age of targeted content, such as social media bubbles and dynamic pricing, both of which are market phenomena that have been shown to trigger consumer mistrust in the post-truth era (Darmody & Zwick, 2020; Garbarino & Lee, 2003). The findings of this study show that epistemic contestation in a post-truth market can be observed in competing discourses of knowledge that assert epistemic authority and undermine opponents' trustworthiness, as well as in the resultant market category confusion. Future studies can enrich our understanding by attending to the presence of competing discourses of knowledge, attempts by market opponents to discredit each others' trustworthiness, and any subsequent development of market category confusion, even in markets that are not made susceptible to post-truth conditions by the characteristics I identified here. Future research can also build on the present study by considering whether or not epistemic contestation emerges always in conjunction with moral contestation, or might emerge as the only form of contestation under different social conditions.

2.2 Marketplace Stigma

Mirabito and colleagues (2016, p. 171) define marketplace stigma as “the labeling, stereotyping, and devaluation by and of commercial stakeholders (consumers, companies and their employees, stockholders, and institutions) and their offerings (products, services, and experiences).” At the market level, stigma has been mobilized as a strategy by various stakeholders to contest, and ultimately delegitimize, markets such as bullfighting (Valor et al., 2021) and halal foods (Johnson, Thomas, Grier, 2017). This is akin to how stigma and shame were mobilized by smoking cessation public health campaigns, leading to the current stigmatization of smokers and other nicotine consumers (Evans-Polce et al., 2015). At the consumer level, Crockett (2017) and Eichert and Luedicke (2022) demonstrate that historical stigma plays an important role in shaping the consumption practices of Black Americans and gay men, respectively. In both studies, consumers affected by historical stigma and ongoing discrimination are not only aware of how their social identities are stigmatized by others, but actively modify their consumption to manage the social and psychological harms of that stigma. This echoes the impact of historical stigma towards smoking and tobacco consumption that has now carried over to the nicotine vaping market. Consumers in this study expressed feeling stigmatized by mainstream (government, medical, and news media) discourses of vaping, and marginalized by popular discourses of tobacco and nicotine use. They consequently sought out alternative knowledge sources that resonate more closely with their lived experience. The role of stigma in pushing affected populations away from trusting mainstream authorities, and towards fringe narratives, is a common strategy for stigmatized groups to cope with being excluded from markets. For example, in an essay on health consumption and class distinctions by American journalist Sarah Smarsh, she describes her father’s response to her family’s inability to afford health insurance as follows:

“Such marginalisation can make you either demonise the system that shuns you or spurn it as something you never needed anyway. When I was a kid and no one in the family had medical or dental insurance, Dad pointed out that those industries were criminal – a sweeping analysis that, whether accurate or not, suggested we were too principled to support the racket rather than too poor to afford it.” (Smarsh, 2014)

The marginalized subject’s reframing of their exclusion from mainstream markets is captured by Smarsh’s (2014) recollection of her father calling health insurance industries “criminal,” subverting the family’s position from one of poverty to one of moral superiority. This reframing is much easier and more accessible now to consumers impacted by stigma, due to the post-truth conditions of mistrust and competing truth claims. Consumers, like other post-truth subjects, are primed to suspect and mistrust claims made by mainstream knowledge authorities, such as medical and dental industries in Smarsh’s example, or Health Canada and medical experts in the case of nicotine vaping examined in this study. Consumers in a market affected by historical stigma are not only prepared to mistrust mainstream discourses, but they are indeed incentivized to mistrust these discourses that have contributed to their marginalization and exclusion in society. The plethora of competing truth claims in the post-truth era also offers the mistrusting, marginalized consumer alternative discourses that might resonate more closely with their lived experience than mainstream discourses. As such, historical stigma contributes to the susceptibility of a market to post-truth conditions because these conditions offer many avenues for coping and resistance for those effected by that stigma.

2.3 Emotion as a Guide in the Post-Truth Era

Recent work on the role of emotions in contested markets demonstrates that social emotions shape macro-level processes such as market legitimation (Mimoun et al., 2022) and

emotion discourses shape delegitimization (Valor et al., 2021). As I have shown here, emotions such as fear and helplessness, play an important role at level of individual post-truth subjectivity, first as a response to post-truth conditions, such as mistrust and competing truth claims, then as a mobilizing force that shapes consumer responses to a post-truth market. Culminating from a sense of marginalization, consumers resort to feeling their way to some semblance of ‘truth.’

Harsin (2018b) calls this phenomenon emo-truth, consisting of:

“truth where emotion serves as inference (prime or indexical sign, emotional or unconscious affective response, and presto: truth). It is felt (though not necessarily consciously), not accompanied by long temporal reasoning.” (Harsin, 2018b, p. 45)

In a post-truth market where truth claims are suspected and authoritative knowledge sources are no longer trusted, all subjects become truth-tellers. Like ‘citizen journalism,’ the phenomena whereby open access to information and publishing platforms allows all members of society to act as journalists (Harsin, 2018a), the individualization of knowing in the post-truth era leads to as many truths as there are truth-tellers. With regards to controversial topics, extant literature points to the importance of perceived personal impact in believing information offered by authoritative sources, such as scientists (Akerlof et al., 2013). The role of emotions in guiding actors in a post-truth market is notable for its impact on individual experiences of consumption, as well as the bottom-up impact on market contestation when consumers are guided by emo-truth rather than authoritative knowledge. Future research should therefore consider the interplay between market-level emotion discourses and individual-level emotions in navigating post-truth conditions and markets.

2.4 Marketplace Activism

Handelman and Fischer (2018) suggest that the current body of literature on consumer activism tends to dualize activist groups and their opponents. At a surface level, narratives of activism in the vaping market appear to conform to dualistic conceptualizations of marketplace activism, with polarized groups of ‘pro-vaping’ and ‘anti-vaping’ advocates. Examining the discursive positions of the two polarized camps points to more complexity than this dichotomy suggests however, consistent Crockett and Pendarvis’s (2017) observation that ideological allies might behave in conflicting ways while ideological opponents might behave in similar ways. For example, a harm reduction position has been adopted by both the Government of Canada (2022b) and pro-vaping consumer advocates (VAEP, 2023) and industry groups (CVA, 2023). Despite both advocating for the same discourse, pro-vaping advocates deeply mistrust Health Canada. Likewise, anti-vaping advocates such as tobacco-control groups also expressed mistrust towards Health Canada. Despite this shared mistrust of Health Canada, anti- and pro-vaping advocates do not recognize this or any other views they share with each other. This commitment to holding polarized positions and disregarding any attitudes or beliefs shared with one’s opponents superficially reinforces the appearance of dualism that Handelman and Fischer (2018) note. However, the discursive overlap between opponents demonstrates that the reality is more complex than these polarized market actors believe. An analysis of the language used by these opposing groups indicates that shared discourses exist across ideological opponents, and that there is notable heterogeneity among the views of those who would consider themselves part of the same advocacy ‘side.’ The findings of this study thus suggest that there is a motivated belief in polarization in the post-truth era; by this, I mean that ideological interests perpetuate the belief in a polarized society, thus pushing market actors to ‘take sides’ while obscuring the heterogeneity and complexity within and across competing discourses. This insight contributes to

prior work by echoing Crockett and Pendarvis' (2017) report of overlap between opposing ideological positions and heterogeneity within each position. It also contributes new depth to this conversation by suggesting that polarization is ideologically driven, so that social views appear to fit one of two polarized camps that are mutually exclusive, even while this ideology undermines the real complexity within and across competing positions. This insight can enrich future studies by urging researchers to ask questions such as: what similarities are there in discourses or beliefs across polarized discourses? And, who benefits from undermining these similarities while normalizing polarization?

This work also contributes to prior studies of marketplace activism by considering advocacy done by market actors that have not been previously considered. Prior studies have focused on a narrow set of 'opponents,' such as consumer advocates, mass media, and corporations, to the exclusion of other market actors (Handelman & Fischer, 2018). In this study, advocacy was observed in the actions of government authorities (Health Canada), large non-profit organizations (e.g., Cancer Foundation), health advocacy groups (e.g., Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada), and industry associations (e.g., Canadian Vaping Association), all of which play an integral role in the nicotine vaping market. The plethora of stakeholders advocating for or against regulatory changes, public perceptions, and truth claims about the nicotine vaping market shows that marketplace activism in the post-truth era goes beyond the traditional view of consumer activists fighting a singular, powerful opponent (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). Marketplace activism in a post-truth market, specifically, reflects a multitude of activist groups fighting each other along polarizing discursive lines. Importantly, whereas prior research on marketplace activism has focused on consumer activists who fight against the 'status quo' (Handelman & Fischer, 2018) to bring about 'social good' (Kozinets & Handelman,

2004), epistemic contestation in a post-truth market means that its competing advocates have different, often-contradictory, notions of ‘status quo’ and ‘social good.’ For example, those who see vapes as a harmful product consider the status quo to be one where youth are introduced to nicotine through vapes. But for those who see vapes as a helpful product, the status quo is one where smokers have suffered from the toxins present in traditional cigarettes and believe that vapes offer a less carcinogenic nicotine alternative. Similarly, competing ideological discourses result in multiple actors claiming to engage in efforts to bring about positive social change, hence the term ‘activism’ and the notion of ‘social good’ are likely to be problematized in a post-truth market. As Ulver (2021, p. 3) points out, “previous consumer research has (with few exceptions) not yet accommodated the wider influences of burgeoning illiberal movements,” indicating that some market actors might be advocating to change what they perceive to be the ‘status quo’ based on ideologies that, to their opponents, undermine rather than promote ‘social good.’ Indeed, in the vaping marketplace there is a plethora of actors involved in seeking to change consumer behavior, industry standards, marketing approaches, and government regulations, often in direct opposition to other advocacy groups targeting the same areas. Marketplace activism in a post-truth market is therefore not a two-way dynamic between an activist group and its opponent, but rather a multi-way dynamic between various competing advocacy groups who fight to establish their version of truth.

3 Conceptual Implications

3.1 Post-Truth Markets

The analysis indicates that some markets, such as nicotine vaping, are particularly susceptible to becoming influenced by post-truth conditions, making them *post-truth markets*. Three characteristics make a market particularly susceptible to post-truth conditions: historical

stigma, restrictive authority interventions, and changes in expert opinions. Each of these three characteristics has been noted individually in prior literature to have important, often destabilizing, consequences in an affected market. The impact of stigma on shaping consumer access to, and engagement with, certain markets has been demonstrated by authors such as Crockett (2017, 2022) and Eichert and Luedicke (2022). Crockett (2022) demonstrates how stigma towards racialized consumer subjects is a routine feature of capitalist market systems, with racial projects as the vehicle by which actors and institutions take action to perpetuate or challenge racial oppression. Eichert and Luedicke (2022) argue that stigma is fragmented, meaning that members of a stigmatized social group do not face equal forms of stigma in society and this variance shapes divergent consumption practices in response to stigma. As for authority interventions, the impact of regulatory restrictions on consumption has also been demonstrated by authors such as Karababa and Ger (2011) and Gopaldas (2014). For example, when sixteenth century Turkish state authorities attempted to restrict the business of coffeehouses, consumers and business owners resisted these restrictions through both overt and covert practices (Karababa & Ger, 2011). Finally, the authority of expert opinion, and the need to restore trust in experts after harmful events, has been shown by Humphreys and Thompson (2014). Their study of consumer trust in expert opinion and risk management after environmental disasters demonstrates that mass media discourse appealed to mythic representations of cleanliness and filth to fulfill the ideological agenda of reinstating public trust in experts and normalizing previously unacceptable levels of environmental risk (Humphreys & Thompson, 2014). The current study adds to this prior literature by demonstrating that all three conditions combined make affected markets highly susceptible to post-truth conditions.

The concept of post-truth markets can help to explain why certain markets experience both moral and epistemic contestation, while many others experience only moral contestation. Giving the example of the international organ trade as a contested market, Steiner (2015) argues that “things are contested goods to the extent that their sale on the market leads to moral controversies” (p. 204). Cochoy (2014) builds on Steiner’s work to suggest that markets involving weaponry or unethical labour practices would also be considered (morally) contested markets. Yet, moral contestation is not sufficient to make these contexts post-truth markets. A post-truth market must possess the three characteristics identified here (historical stigma, restrictive authority interventions, and changes in expert opinions), which renders it susceptible to the influence of post-truth conditions, leading to both moral and epistemic contestation among market actors.

While nicotine vaping in Canada is the context of this study, the proposed concept of post-truth markets is likely to fit any context where market actors face social stigma for their involvement, where regulatory authorities have attempted to intervene and restrict production, sales, or access to products, and where changing expert opinions have further eroded public trust. Contexts that fit these three characteristics of a post-truth market are also likely to exhibit both moral and epistemic contestation. One such example is the COVID-19 vaccine market. For consumers who were hesitant to be vaccinated against COVID-19, there was already a history of stigma and alienation of those suspicious of biomedical interventions such as vaccination (Thompson, 2004). In many countries, regulatory authorities restricted the access of those who refused to be vaccinated to consumption activities like common-carrier traveling, crossing international borders, and indoor dining or entertainment (Torjesen, 2021). Finally, scientific experts had initially warned that a safe and effective vaccine against COVID-19 would take a

very long time to produce (Li et al., 2020), and this message contradicted the relatively rapid roll-out of mRNA vaccines to members of the public. Moreover, discourses for and against vaccination comprised both moral arguments and a multitude of competing information. For instance, competing moral discourses emerged over the timelines of vaccine clinical trials and rollout to the public. The vaccine produced by AstraZeneca, for instance, was offered in Canada before it had clear third-phase clinical trials and gained approval by the Food and Drug Administration in the United States. Some believed that Canada's authorization of this vaccine for public use before the completion of clinical trials was an unethical move (Tasker, 2021). This belief was compounded by concerns that the AstraZeneca vaccine had caused a side effect of blood clots in a small number of people with pre-existing circulatory conditions (Tasker, 2021). Proponents of the vaccine argued that "the benefits of protecting against COVID-19 — which itself results in clotting problems — outweigh the risks" (Tasker, 2021, p. 2). Moral questions of what level of risk to individual consumers from a vaccine is acceptable in exchange for reducing risk to society from a pandemic surrounded the AstraZeneca vaccine as well as others.

Competing epistemic discourses also shaped public dialogue about vaccination against COVID-19. For example, the exclusion of pregnant women from vaccine clinical trials led to two different conclusions by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). The WHO took the absence of data as a lack of support for recommending vaccination in pregnant women, and as such recommended that pregnant women avoid receiving COVID-19 vaccines unless they were at heightened risk of exposure to the virus (Mandavilli & Rabin, 2021). On the other hand, the CDC took the lack of data as the basis to recommend that pregnant women decide, individually and in consultation with their physicians, if they ought to receive COVID-19 vaccines (Mandavilli & Rabin, 2021). Epistemic contestation here is not

simply the outcome of conflicting recommendations from different health authorities, but it is rather the outcome of competing epistemic approaches towards the production of knowledge based on incomplete information. The WHO demonstrated an epistemic approach that considers the production of knowledge (or public health recommendations) to be only valid when clinical data specific to pregnant women is available. In the absence of clinical data about the effect of COVID-19 vaccines in pregnant women, the CDC demonstrated a different epistemic approach that considered not only this absence of data, but the presence of other data showing “no theoretical risks” and “no risk in animal studies” (Mandavilli & Rabin, 2021, p. 1). As such, the COVID-19 vaccine market has faced both moral and epistemic contestation that continues to shape public dialogue about vaccination today. Given that this market fulfills the three characteristics of post-truth markets, and also demonstrates moral and epistemic contestation, I would consider the COVID-19 vaccine market to be a post-truth market.

Post-truth markets can be found outside of health contexts as well. For example, the nuclear power market demonstrates the three characteristics of post-truth markets and also exhibits both moral and epistemic contestation. The first characteristic of post-truth markets, historical stigma, affects energy infrastructure in general (Carley, Konisky, Atiq, Land, 2020) and nuclear power in particular (Baron & Herzog, 2020) due to fears of environmental pollution and harms to public health. From the 1986 deadly nuclear disaster in Chernobyl, Ukraine to the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in Japan, long-standing fear and dread (Abdulla, Vaishnav, Sergi, Victor, 2019) have shaped public disapproval towards those who promote nuclear power (Baron & Herzog, 2020). The second characteristic, authority intervention to restrict market activities, has been seen in government responses after nuclear disasters. For example, after the 1979 Three Mile Island disaster in Pennsylvania, while some nations defended

nuclear power, many governments “rush[ed] forward ...with demands to stop or phase out nuclear power, seeking to give political form to an anxiety that they see among voters” (Blix, 1986, p. 9). Italy deactivated its nuclear reactors and Sweden placed a 30-year ban on new nuclear plants after these disasters (Adamantiades & Kessides, 2009). The third characteristic, changing expert opinions, can also be seen in this context. Following World War II, American experts promoted nuclear power as the “peaceful atom” (Baron & Herzog, 2020). However, after the Three Mile Island and Chernobyl disasters, experts emphasized the environmental and health risks associated with nuclear energy (Drottz & Sjöberg, 1990; Van Der Pligt, Van Der Linden, Ester, 1982). One expert accused the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR) of using falsified data to “to support its minimization of harm” (Bertell, 2008, p. 28). In recent years, experts have attempted to promote nuclear power as a sustainable alternative to fossil fuels by reassuring the public that “radiation releases from the Fukushima nuclear accident didn't kill anyone” (Abdulla et al., 2019, p. 1340). The rocky history of changing expert opinions on the safety of nuclear power to human health and the environment does not appeal to public trust, especially in the post-truth era.

In addition to having the three characteristics that make a market highly susceptible to the impacts of post-truth conditions, nuclear power is also a market that suffers from both moral and epistemic contestation. Moral contestation can be seen in the two powerful, competing moral discourses that have shaped the nuclear energy market. One moral discourse is based on the belief that the risks of nuclear energy to the environment and to human life outweigh its economic benefits, and this discourse is used by opponents against the nuclear energy market (de Groot & Steg, 2010). An opposing discourse appeals to the moral obligation of endorsing nuclear energy as the answer to reducing emissions and addressing climate change precipitated by the

burning of oil and gas (Abdulla et al., 2019). Additionally, epistemic contestation is apparent in the nuclear energy market. The industry's proponents and opponents view nuclear energy through discrete epistemic lenses. Proponents view nuclear energy as "a relatively secure, largely carbon-free alternative to fossil fuels" and emphasize that "advanced nuclear reactors have been designed to be simpler and safer" than in the past (Adamantiades & Kessides, 2009, p. 5165). On the other hand, opponents emphasize that "rapid nuclear expansion would heighten accident risks and long-term waste disposal problems" (Baron and Herzog, 2020, p. 1), and point to past damages to the environment and human life due to accidents. Both moral and epistemic contestation affect the nuclear power market, indicating that stakeholders ought to attend not only to competing moral narratives but also to competing truth claims within this market as governments around the world reconsider the potential of nuclear energy (Adamantiades & Kessides, 2009).

3.2 Post-Truth Subjectivity

From industry advocates to consumers, market actors in the nicotine vaping market share a particular perspective that is shaped by, and reproduces, post-truth conditions. The impact of post-truth conditions on the subjectivity of consumers and other stakeholders in the nicotine vaping market became apparent as I analyzed the data. Post-truth subjects assess not only the trustworthiness of knowledge claims, but also that of truth-tellers and information sources, which are all approached with suspicion and mistrust (Ott, 2017). A post-truth subjectivity is the direct outcome of the conditions of the post-truth era, which means that a post-truth subjectivity can be observed across all markets within this era, but is more salient in markets that are especially impacted by post-truth conditions. The characteristics of a post-truth subjectivity recursively

emerge from, and reinforce, the three post-truth conditions, including mistrust, competing truth claims, and polarization.

Post-truth subjects are prepared to mistrust other actors and authoritative knowledge claims. In the nicotine vaping context, market actors approach all new information, and each other, with suspicion, mistrust, and an expectation that bad-faith agents actively spread misinformation for ulterior motives. In other words, the belief in systemic deception may be an outcome of Harsin's (2018a, p. 8) suggestion that "disinformers may produce misinformers." Competing advocacy groups in the nicotine vaping market perpetuated competing truth claims by adopting discourses that undermine their opponents. These moral and knowledge discourses not only empower each actor to claim to be a micro truth-teller, thus creating more competing truth -claims, but also reinforce mistrust and suspicion towards opposing actors by undermining their credibility. Additionally, post-truth subjects are sensitized to inconsistencies in information or behavior as evidence of intentional deceit. For example, market actors in this study pointed out contradictions in their opponents' claims or behaviors as indicators of low moral value or as intentional attempts to disseminate disinformation.

The post-truth subject also develops skills for navigating competing truth claims, such as seeking alternative truth sources regardless of their epistemic capital or reputation for being (un)trustworthy. Both advocates and consumers alike spoke of "doing their own research," regardless of the reliability of the information sources they sought, as support for the beliefs they held. The post-truth subject also relies on personal experience as a source of information that has not been manipulated for the interests of others, that is, information that can be trusted. This echoes Van Zoonen's (2012, p. 60) proposed concept of "*i*-pistemology," a post-truth phenomenon where knowledge-seeking begins "from the basis of I (as in me, myself) and

Identity, with the Internet as the great facilitator.” This idea is consistent with extant literature on controversial topics such as climate change, with evidence pointing to the importance of perceived personal impact in believing information offered by scientific experts (Akerlof et al., 2013). Consumers in this study demonstrated *i*-pistemology by showcasing a reliance on embodied knowledge to help them discern which among the many competing truth claims shaping the vaping market they could trust. Beyond consumers, other market actors like industry advocates, business owners, and health advocates also referred to their personal experience to support their views of this market.

Finally, the post-truth subject is ready to believe in a lack of common ground with those who hold opposing views, reflecting a certain habituation to ‘choosing sides’ in an increasingly polarized era. Market actors in the nicotine vaping market perpetuate polarization by adhering to mutually exclusive knowledge discourses, resulting in a dynamic where actors are prepared to see how their ideological stance differs from their opponents rather than to notice areas of agreement. Consumers and advocates in the nicotine vaping market held steadfastly to their pro- or anti-vape stance, all asserting a total inability to comprehend how people can reasonably hold the opposing view. Examining the discursive positions of these two camps points to more complexity than this dichotomy suggests, consistent with what has been noted by Crockett and Pendarvis (2017) that ideological allies might behave in conflicting ways while ideological opponents might behave in similar ways. Indeed, the competing truth markets, or partisan information brokers (Harsin, 2018a), in the vaping market have generated truth claims that not only contradict those of the opposing group, but also contain internal inconsistencies, thus highlighting the fragmentation of truth claims in a post-truth market.

The concept of a post-truth subjectivity can offer depth in future studies of markets and consumption, even in ‘regular’ markets that are not post-truth markets, as a post-truth subjectivity is the result of the post-truth era within which all contemporary markets operate. As the post-truth era endures, all market actors will continue to grapple with mistrust, competing truth claims, and polarization. The insights offered based on the findings of this study open opportunities for future research to examine the post-truth subjectivity in greater depth. For example, future studies can ask whether post-truth subjectivity is experienced along a continuum, with certain market actors exhibiting it more strongly than others, as well as figuring out what individual characteristics and external, environmental factors make a consumer or group particularly susceptible to post-truth subjectivity. It would also be fruitful to understand the precipitating factors and boundary conditions of behaviors and beliefs emerging from a post-truth subjectivity.

4 Practical Implications

This work has implications both within the context of nicotine vaping and more broadly for markets impacted by post-truth conditions. The findings demonstrate that consumers experience significant confusion and distress while navigating competing information about the health risks of nicotine consumption, the potential health risks of vaping, and the reasoning behind proposed restrictions on the production and sales of vaping products. Consumers’ post-truth subjectivity prepares them to be critical and questioning of information, which is a strong coping strategy given the normalization of misinformation. Marketing managers and industry representatives would benefit from responding to consumers’ critical lens by offering transparency regarding any sponsorships or partnerships with partisan entities (e.g., tobacco companies, lobbyist groups, retailers).

The findings also demonstrate a link between consumers' perceptions of being stigmatized for their nicotine consumption and their increasing mistrust in mainstream authorities, such as government and health experts, as well as an increasing openness to alternative information sources. As such, public policymakers are encouraged to prioritize public engagement as part of the policymaking process, particularly by including the voices of consumers who feel alienated by the historical stigma against nicotine consumption. It is in the best interests of society, both in terms of reducing collective health risks and in fighting misinformation, that policymakers invest in regaining the trust of consumers who are pro-vaping. This can be done by increasing transparency regarding the reasoning behind new market regulations, increasing transparency around funding sources and meeting with lobbyist/advocacy groups, and holding regular public consultations to allow consumers who feel stigmatized to have their voices heard in the policymaking process.

Advocates in a post-truth market, whether they are consumer advocates, health advocates, or industry advocates, can gain public trust by acknowledging their own positionality. The findings of this study demonstrate how opposing groups portray themselves as objective and unbiased, while in fact echoing discourses that position them on one side or the other of a polarized debate. Persisting in stating that one's views are objective and neutral is likely to raise suspicion and mistrust among consumers and members of the public, and can perpetuate polarization between market actors. Overcoming the fragmentation of knowledge in the post-truth era is key for encouraging trust, agreement, and dialogue, and the first step towards this is acknowledging that each perspective is inherently subjective in the post-truth era.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Interview Questions.

Consumer Interview Guide

1. Please introduce yourself
 - a. What is your age, gender, and occupation?
2. Have you ever smoked cigarettes?
 - a. When did you start smoking cigarettes?
 - b. Have you ever tried to quit smoking?
3. Have you ever tried nicotine vaping or e-cigarettes?

(If yes)

4. When did you start vaping?
5. What prompted you to start vaping?
6. How often do you vape?
7. What do you like about vaping?
8. Do you have a certain type of vape you typically use?
9. What are your favourite vapes?
10. Can you tell me about how you learned about your favourite vape(s)?
11. Can you tell me about your most favourite and least favourite aspect of vaping?
12. Do you think of yourself as a vaper? Why/Why not?
13. There's practices, (example: adopting dogs; eating organic), that some organizations support and some organizations don't. Do you think this is the case for vaping?
14. Do you think there is a vaping community?
15. Is there a social aspect to vaping?
 - a. Do you participate in any vaping communities online or in person? If so, which ones?
16. Has your life changed since you started vaping? If so, in what way has it changed?
17. Where do you shop online and offline for your vapes and accessories?
18. Do you think there is a difference between vaping and smoking?
19. Anything else you'd like to add?

(If not)

20. How often do you smoke?
21. When did you start hearing about vaping?
22. Did you ever consider trying vaping?
23. Is there a reason you have not tried vaping?
24. Who do you think supports vaping, and why do you think they support it?
25. Who do you think does not support vaping, and why do you think they do not?
26. Do you think there is a vaping community?
27. If you have considered trying vaping, how do you think it would affect your life?
28. Do you think there is a difference between vaping and smoking?
29. Anything else you'd like to add?

Expert and Advocate Interview Guide

1. Please introduce yourself
 - a. What is your occupation? How long have you been in this role?
2. Did you know much about vaping before starting this work?
3. How does the work you do contribute to [vaping industry AND/OR vaping policy]
4. Can I ask if you ever tried nicotine vaping or e-cigarettes?
 - a. If yes, when did you start? How often do you vape?
5. Do you know much about the different types of vapes?
6. Do you think vaping in Canada has changed in the last ten years?
7. Do you think people who vape share anything in common with each other?
8. Do you think vaping has been helpful or harmful for people who smoke cigarettes?
9. Who do you think supports vaping, and why do you think they support it?
10. Who do you think does not support vaping, and why do you think they do not?
11. What do you think about organizations that
 - a. advocate for more lenient regulation of the vaping market?
 - b. advocate for tighter regulation of the vaping market?
12. Anything else you'd like to add?

Appendix B. Additional Quotes Exemplifying Consumer Responses.

Relational Knowledge	<p>“I know that it's [flavour bans] going to hurt the vaping industry quite a bit, just because like the novelty is gone. Like the whole thing about going to a vape shop is the conversation. It's like, oh, ‘What juice did you get? Yours tastes like grape jam? Dude! I went to the vape shop across the street. You got to try this, this tastes like chocolate milk.’ Like that whole thing is gone, if that happens, right? And there's so much stigma around like these flavor bans and stuff like that.” (Consumer, former vaper and former smoker)</p>
	<p>“I was just loading Facebook here and then somebody sent me some stuff that I was asking for on the Facebook group that I told you about. Yeah. I've been looking at some stuff, so they set me up with this little mini fit [vape setup].” (Consumer, current vaper and former smoker)</p>
	<p>“Like I'll see a vaper as I'll walk by and I'll be like, ‘Yeah, man.’ Now we have a little, it's almost like a cheers. It's like you show up and they're vaping and you're just like, ‘What's up?’ If we got time to say, ‘Hi,’ then you do. If you don't, you keep walking. And if we're going opposite directions then it's just, I'll keep going. And sometimes you'll get a ‘Hi,’ nod at each other. It depends. I've gone up to someone and said, ‘Hey man, I haven't seen any vapers. Your vape, how do you like it?’ And then you end up sitting there for like a good hour and a half, you know, talking about vaping. It also creates a culture based on what people use. I saw a video about rebuildable tanks. So he was saying that, you know, 10, 15 years ago, the thing was, heck it might even been five years ago when he, when they were still doing it, where he said people were, but he said about a decade ago when people were saying, it wasn't about what brand of vape they're using, like it is today. Instead the question was, ‘What cotton balls worked best for you? What brand of cotton ball?’ Because that's what they used. I mean, you'd go to the drugstore and get like a package of cotton balls or, or a pack of cotton or cotton pads to work with your coils.” (Consumer, current vaper and former smoker)</p>
Embodied Knowledge	<p>“My husband went from buying two asthma inhalers every six weeks [when smoking] to two asthma inhalers every six months [when vaping]. And he's not an exceptions. That's - we see this over and over and over again, people not needing their oxygen as much [after switching to vaping from smoking].” (Consumer, current vaper and former smoker)</p>
	<p>“Vaping helped me change my life around but the government and other agencies continue to lie about facts of vaping and their harm... This whole mess in Canada is driven by people that don't look at facts. Here are some facts for you: after vaping I had better stamina, better breathing,</p>

off CPAP machine, blood pressure is normal and most of all? I am smoke free - the freaking point of vaping. Doctors and nurses never even knew I vaped until I told them. I am not saying it is 100% safe but I am saying it helps me have a better quality of life.” (**Consumer, current vaper and former smoker**)

“But no one really looks at where you're coming from. I'm coming from, I mean, I was this helpless guy. I was actually looking at myself. Why did I try so hard to quit smoking? If I liked it so much. And if I really enjoy doing it so much, why did I go cold turkey? Why did I put patches on me? Have you tried those nicotine gums? No? If you can chew one of them and not throw it away, you're really good. I went through this for a reason. I saw myself going down every day and since I found this [vaping] I've been on it. And every day I'm feeling better, something comes and tries to take it away from me. Someone tries not just to take it away, but push me towards smoking. It's easier to buy a pack of cigarettes than it is to buy this [modular vape]. So I'm being pushed back to cigarettes by the government. And yet, I don't know if you're getting the same type of advertising or not, but in Ontario now they're saying they want a cigarette-free Canada.” (**Consumer, current vaper and former smoker**)

“I used to be a one pack a day smoker. I used to have the morning cough. I used to have the evening cough. I used to swim in a swimming team and I stopped swimming. I stopped my regular jogs. I would cough a lot of brown stuff in the morning and in the evening. All that stuff. What is remarkable is since then [starting vaping], I mean, I'm jogging now. I'm swimming now. My breathing is normal. I actually took a lung capacity test for asthma, about six months ago. My lungs are completely normal, not even a smoker's normal. So that is remarkable.” (**Consumer, current vaper and former smoker**)

Entrepreneurship

“I've done, you know, did a lot of research into this, the juice that I make. Almost constantly. And some people think I'm a dinosaur for this. Um, it's a vanilla custard and specifically there's two elements to that. One is vanilla. If you understand about aromatherapy and what vanilla does for the brain. And there's also cinnamon in one of the, in one of the ingredients that I use that simulates the throat hit. So I can simulate a throat hit and get a calming feeling from vanilla without having to use nicotine.” (**Consumer, current vaper and former smoker**)

“The flavor ban? I'm sorry, I make my own juice. You're not going to stop me from vaping. They might wipe out the industry, but there's some diehards out there that, you know, and they can't tackle that.” (**Consumer, current vaper and former smoker**)

“I don't think anyone's going to die from it [DIY e-juice], but you know, I've had this discussion online in the past and it's like, I mix in my kitchen, I've never poisoned my food. My kitchen is clean. I'm confident in my ability, but I don't share what I mix. Right. So the next guy that thinks he's going to make some money on the black market [selling DIY e-juice], you know, I could see there being issues like somebody is going to make a mistake somewhere.” (**Consumer, current vaper and former smoker**)

“Oh, I'm saying euros because you can't buy this from Canada. It's illegal to purchase in Canada, but you can order it. You can order it from Europe and it actually clears customs. So it's allowed to be purchased online, but you cannot buy it from a local vape store. So, I make my own e-liquid, make my own coils, pretty much self sufficient here.” (**Consumer, current vaper and former smoker**)

Activism

“So when I read this, you know, I sent an email to my member of parliament saying, look at the evidence. JUUL the one that created this problem. You know, Juul has marketed directly at teenagers. These are well-established facts. Why are we, why is Juul even still in business in this. If we're fighting a youth vaping epidemic, why is the company that created the problem even still on the map?” (**Consumer, current vaper and former smoker**)

“So through this, the reason why I got involved in advocacy on the consumer side is that I'm a user, like everyone else I use vaping products. So I consider myself a consumer first, always. Um, second, I got involved in this because in 2014, the city of Toronto decided that they were going to ban vaping on city-owned properties, where their employees were, but weren't going to ban smoking. And that ban went through and [health advocacy group] brought in a bus full of schoolchildren to sing an anti-smoking song, just to pull at the heartstrings. And at that point in my life, I said to myself, I am responsible to help people quit smoking. I will not ever again be blindsided by regulations that are not done on science and are ridiculous, and that put vaping at a place where it is worse than smoking. So that's how I got involved.” (**Consumer, current vaper and former smoker**)
