Title: Preparing for a World without Markets: Legitimising Strategies of Preppers

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Abstract

'Prepping' – the storing of food, water and weapons as well as the development of self-sufficiency skills for the purpose of independently surviving disasters – is an emerging market as well as an expression of generalised anxiety about existential threats (e.g. technological collapse and catastrophic climate change). Whilst accounts of eccentric prepping are common in mainstream media, there is little empirical investigation into how consumers imagine and prepare for a temporary or permanent halt to functioning market systems, and with it, a consumer society. A netnography of European preppers reveals prepping to be an anticipatory mode of practicing for a post-market, post-consumer society before it becomes a reality. We find that preparation is a struggle for cognitive legitimacy through four different modes: vulnerabilising the market, common-sensing market signals, othering civilian consumers and unblackboxing objects.

Keywords: Prepping, existential risk, legitimation, consumption, (anti-)community.

Summary Statement of Contribution

The experiences of prepping we present here extend legitimacy theory through the less explored domain of cognitive legitimacy –ways in which systems of reality are legitimated because they are scientifically, logically or statistically likely, in this case the systemic crises of the market and consumption. The findings have implications for public policy, namely they inform us about anticipatory modes of practicing a post-consumer society.

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Introduction: TEOTWAWKI

We are all fucked. A crude statement that encapsulates the anxiety of a decade that has apparently accelerated the sense of existential dread we experience on many fronts, including but in no way limited to the possibility of climate-induced population extinctions, NBIC (nano-bio-info-cogno-) convergence, global financial collapse, and the exponential development of potentially malevolent machine intelligence. The Doomsday Clock, a symbolic gauge of our risk of obliterating human civilisation (Vuori, 2010), is inching precariously close to 'midnight', reflecting an acute anxiety in the scientific community. Our vulnerability to existential risk – that is, risk 'that threatens to cause the extinction of Earth-originating intelligent life or to otherwise permanently and drastically destroy its potential for future desirable development' (Bostrom, 2014, p.115), it would appear, is at an all-time high.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that the types of risks threatening the planet today are qualitatively new: they are irreversible, they have planetary (and in some cases extra-planetary) reach, and they have new technological textures. Of course, the end of humanity is as old as humanity itself (Friedrich, 1982) – astrologists, religious orders and certainly economists have predicted that the world will end since the beginning of time. 'Prepping' – a predominantly American phenomenon of storing food, water and weapons as well as developing self-sufficiency skills for the purpose of independently surviving disasters – is on the rise.

But while popular media accounts tend to focus on the hyperbolic eccentricities of prepping for TEOTWAWKI (The End Of The World As We Know It) (see for example; Osnos, 2017; O'Connell, 2018), empirical research suggests that prepping is not a marginal sub-culture, but an

increasingly mainstream phenomenon, driven not by delusional certainty, but a precautionary response to a generalised anxiety people have around permanent crisis (Huddleston, 2016; Kelly, 2016; Mills, 2018). The challenging nature of documenting such generalised, amorphous dread is perhaps an explanation for the lack of contemporary consumer culture research in this field. Although eschatological visions and the salience of consumers' mortality have been variously explored in consumer culture theory (Brown, Bell and Carson, 1996; Ferraro et al., 2005; O'Donohoe and Turley, 2017), we argue that there is something qualitatively different about preparation, or prepping. The investigation that thus preoccupies us is how consumers imagine and prepare for a temporary or permanent halt to a functioning market system, and with it, a consumer society. Specifically, our study examines how such a prepping culture, which can be viewed as paranoid and potentially unhinged to the outsider, is legitimised.

Drawing from a three-month netnography of a European prepper community, as well as seven depth interviews with individuals who identified with prepper culture, our findings explore how – quite distinct from the hype of big catastrophe – prepping is an anticipatory mode of practising for a post-market, post-consumer society. Our observations of, and in-depth discussion with the prepper community, reveal that preppers occupy an interesting position vis-a-vis extant consumer legitimation and community literatures: their precautionary trials of divestiture from consumer and market dependence means they have one foot in the market 'system', and one outside. In the remainder of this paper, we review extant work on legitimation in consumer research and position our argument, namely, that four main modes of legitimisation of prepping exist: *vulnerabilising*, *common-sensing*, *othering* and *unblackboxing*.

Legitimacy and consumption

Legitimacy is 'a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some social-constructed system of norms, values, beliefs or definitions' (Suchman, 1995, p.574). As a theory, legitimation has been variously developed in social psychology, which focusses on the strategies of legitimation of individuals or subcultures, and institutional theory, which turns its attention to how structural forces like the media and the law exert forms of endorsement over time. Legitimacy implies a tacit or explicit social contract linking people with organisations and institutions. People expect these large groups to adhere to legitimacy – a behavioral style distinguished by proper and desirable actions (Patten, 1992). Institutions and influential actors re-frame once suspect or marginalised practices by bridging them to an already accepted frame (Kates, 2002; Humphreys, 2010); organisations engage in co-optation of the marginalised practice by encompassing and then 'taming' it, often using it as a source of market value (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007; Larsen and Lawson, 2013 Coskuner-Balli and Ertimur, 2017); governments use policy to re-write the script of accepted behaviours to variously normalise some and denormalise others (Hammond et al., 2006), and consumer researchers have highlighted how the work of justifying or identifying with one's system leads to different types of consumption, like the realisation of fossil fuel finiteness (Press and Arnould, 2011) or threats to American cultural-economic dominance (Cutwright et al., 2011).

Legitimacy has been categorised into three broad types: regulative, which functions through external forms of sanction; normative, which tends to leverage value-laden beliefs in a culture; and cognitive, which are the 'just-isness' of the world's facts (see Suchman, 1995; Johnson et al.,

2001). While consumer research has witnessed a burgeoning of work in the first two, less attention has been given to the ways systems of reality are legitimated because they are scientifically, logically or statistically true or likely, like systemic crises of the market and consumption. In their logical justification of the probability of various collapse scenarios, preppers are an interesting site through which to view this type of legitimation struggle.

Both institutional accounts and social psychologies of legitimacy generally describe a self-fulfilling process whereby socially powerful actors and institutions are approached with deference, and this is circularly authorised and endorsed, such that the system perpetuates and broadens its reach. Change happens incrementally, when social innovations are consonant with the widely accepted cultural framework of beliefs, values, and regulation.

Consumer research demonstrates a drive in a community to 'vie for legitimacy' (Humphreys 2009) and emphasises the role of displays of pride, provocation and protest in the construction of alternative market systems (e.g. Kates, 2002; Schor and Thompson, 2014; Harju and Huovinen, 2015). These practices sometimes seek inclusion or equal footing with the dominant regime (Scarabato and Fischer, 2013) or a dismissal of the dominant regime's legitimacy (Sandikci and Ger, 2010), and often both (Kates, 2002).

Legitimacy relies on perceived propriety and validity (Johnson et al., 2001; Zelditch, 2001). Propriety signals an actor's belief in the norms of the social order as desirable and appropriate, while validity refers to an actor's obligation to observe norms even if s/he personally feels at odds with them. Authorisation is the way in which institutions, norms and behaviours become

legitimate because they are adopted by actors in power. Resistance is difficult as this circuit holds cultural and economic capital. For consumer researchers, the interest has been on how such resistance can be performed through acts of consumption (Üstüner and Thompson, 2015). In such cases, when a consumption practice is at odds with marketplace regulation, normativity or cognition, it leads to the practice's marginalisation and stigmatisation (Sandikci and Ger, 2010). Consumer researchers have provided evidence for how behaviours gain or lose legitimacy over time when regulatory regimes and institutions like the media, brands or governments re-frame them as appropriate or inappropriate, or when formally illegitimate activities begin to approximate a regulatory, normative or cognitive form, as in the cases of gambling (Humphreys, 2010), food-sharing (Gollnhofer, 2017) and car-pooling (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012).

Studying legitimacy is useful because legitimating strategies are clearly ideology-making. What is less recognised is how as-yet illegitimate forms of consumption use cognition – the logical extension of reason – to sustain their world-view. We propose that studying preppers can allow policy makers to project an alternative ideology of sustainability that is quite at odds with the dominant ideology. While the connotations of 'a sustainable society' are ineluctably positive, offering visions of connection, cooperation, sharing and caring, preppers offer counter-factual evidence of a 'sustainable' world wherein new forms of protectionism and individuality pertain, a 'warre-of-all-against-all' (in Thomas Hobbes' famous vision) is fought; community is dangerous, and consumption is a bunkering down – all of which might seem socially regressive to those thinking about the legitimation of alternative systems to the neo-liberal market system.

Methodology

The data presented in this paper are drawn from in-depth interviews and a netnography of European prepper forums that are part of a larger multi-site, multi-method research project on risk and preparation. The netnography comprised observation of three different online forums and active participation in one. We sought out prepper forums that had achieved a sizable membership, had active and ongoing interactions between members and selected only forums in which members identify with prepper culture, and specifically refer to prepping practices in the description of their forum. In total, over 1,000 forum threads were analysed, and approximately 180 posts were contributed by one researcher to discussions on the *Prepping in the UK* forum (see Table 1 below for an overview of forums).

Table 1: Overview of prepper forums sampled

Forum name* & description	Mode of investigation	Date started	Total Membership	Number of forum threads analysed	Number of posts contributed by researcher
Survive UK	Non-participatory	2011	1,500	200	n/a
Prepping and survival	Non-participatory	2012	800	300	n/a
Prepping in the UK	Participatory	2011	3,5000	550	181

(*pseudonyms used for prepper forums)

An initial non-participatory approach for the first two forums was appropriate because the moniker 'prepper' is a contested one. For some, it is a label they begrudgingly accept, recognising its more extreme connotations with American 'doomsdayers' that are portrayed stereotypically in mass media through the dominant imagery of underground bunkers and weapons' stockpiling. For others, it is a label openly embraced. As a first phase of analysis, our

observations across the two prepper forums served as a useful and non-intrusive way to listen and interpret this contestation. Specific focus was paid to what preparation topics forum members chose to discuss and not discuss, and the concepts used (and eschewed) when discussing prepping.

These observations revealed that the term 'prepping' covers a wide variety of preparation interests and skills including (e.g. mental health, farming, body armour, primitive fire making, lock-picking) that are termed 'preps' in the forums. In contrast to popular media accounts, there is not much specification of particular risks. In other words, the reasons why one would need to use a particular prep were often left to the imagination. However, those that were identified generally revolved around risks and eventualities that cover a wide spectrum from those that are highly likely to befall anyone at some stage (e.g. car breaking down) to the more unlikely (e.g. complete collapse of financial institutions).

To fully comprehend this group's experiences of preparation a second phase of analysis, involving active participation in the online prepper community, ensued. We selected one forum, *Prepping in the UK* (with approximately 3,500 members) in which one of the researchers became fully immersed. The majority of interactions are with participants who have been posting on the forum since about 2011. A researcher's active participation in an online community is not always easy, particularly when dealing with sensitive or personal matters (Costello, McDermott and Wallace, 2017, p. 7). The names of the forums have been replaced with pseudonyms. 'Op-sec' or 'operational security' is an oft-referenced term within the prepper community which refers to concerns about personal privacy and the strategic advantage of withholding information

about the location of resources in the eventuality that any 'prep' may be put into practice. The researcher was met with much suspicion regarding the intentions of the study upon entrée. This was based on an apparent long history of journalists who had previously engaged in forums and written articles which relied on ill-informed stereotypes which the members of the community felt stigmatised prepping practices.

As a consequence, the researcher was explicit regarding the intentions of the research in the participation forum from the beginning, informing the moderators and community members on the purpose of the research, their identity and credentials. In addition to meeting the general requirements of forum membership, other conditions were agreed upon before the researcher was accepted as a member in the community, including the restricted permission to use direct quotes for publication, the replacement of usernames with pseudonyms, and the use of private messages to answer questions the participants had about the research and to discuss particular topics in greater detail. Despite following forum rules, there continued to be an atmosphere of suspicion regarding the researcher's intentions. The researcher encountered criticism for asking questions that were deemed as leading and/or provocative to community concerns that they may be portrayed in an unwelcome stereotypical fashion.

This is the cost of being an outsider when conducting research in unfamiliar settings. However, this type of critical engagement was useful for building knowledge about prepping from the ground up, rather than taking for granted the norms that many insider accounts may be subject to. The forum participants led the research by taking the time to make clear to the researcher what prepping is/is not, even when this created tension. The tension was helpful for creating an

informed and spirited discussion that directed the researchers away from some of priorities they had prior to entrée. This study's phased approach ensured many of the key hallmarks of quality netnographic enquiry including, immersive depth, researcher identification, prolonged engagement, persistent conversations and continuity of the human narrative (see Costello et al., 2017; Kozinets, Scraraboto and Parmentier, 2018).

There are hundreds of forum topics and thousands of posts related to prepping on each prepping forum. To make the analysis of these forums more manageable, our immersion was bound to a three month intensive observation period between August and October 2017. The researchers drew from forum topics, both pre-existing in the passive observation phase and those specifically discussed with members in the netnographic phase. These included how members of the community became interested in prepping, and how they envision and plan for the future.

Analysis of the data collected in the netnographic phase of this study involved two of the researchers independently analysing published posts and subsequent comments on those posts for each forum. Using the constant comparison method (Spiggle, 1994), the researchers used an iterative approach to analyse the forum members' interactions, and to identify themes emerging from forum discussions. Each forum was studied until both researchers had a good understanding of the characteristic practices and perceptions of the forum members. Analysis continued until no further themes emerged. The third researcher then reviewed the entire coded data set and the two sets of emerging themes were identified. Clarification and corroboration from the two researchers was sought.

The third phase of analysis involved approaching two forum members, identified as key informants, for interview (see table 2), who in turn suggested five other preppers they viewed as key informants (see Marshall, 1992). These interviews helped with data triangulation (Denzin, 2012), whereby many popular forum discussion topics were verified and corroborated by interview respondents and explored in greater detail. Identifying key informants within the prepper community presented challenges due to the aforementioned 'operational security' protocol within this community. The trust established during the netnographic phase of the research helped overcome this issue. A point of data saturation was agreed and confirmed by all three researchers following the completion of seven interviews, when it was perceived that no new themes were emerging and further coding of the data from both the netnography and interviews was no longer feasible (Guest et al., 2006). Acknowledging that data saturation is not about the numbers, but rather the *depth* of data (Fusch and Ness, 2015). Our immersive netnography followed by our one-to one in-depth interviews with key informants, sufficiently allowed for valid interpretation of the prepper phenomenon.

All of the interviews took place over Skype or the telephone. Each researcher transcribed verbatim the interviews they conducted and transcripts were circulated amongst the researchers for independent coding and analysis followed by a similar process of corroboration and verification of the themes that emerged. As a final measure of robustness, a draft of the paper was sent to each of the forum members who are directly quoted in the paper and to the seven interviewees for their consideration and confirmation. Consumer legitimacy emerged as the central focus of the data analysis. This is discussed in detail in the next section where we present four modes of legitimation; vulnerabilising, common-sensing, othering and unblackboxing.

Table 2: Key informant profile

Informant name*	Age bracket	Stated occupation	Time identifying as a prepper	Interview length
William	25-35	Lawyer	11 years	2hr 18 mins
Hagen	55-65	Former merchant navy officer; engineer	Since 1980s	59 mins
Bedivere	55-65	Podcaster and transport business owner	All of his adult life	1hr 16mins
Lovet	35-45	Business owner	Since he was 11 years old	51 minutes
Janet	25-35	Media	Since leaving school	1hr 41 mins
Hugo	20-30	Not specified	5 years	1hr 30 mins
Arthur	55-65	Cyber security	All of his adult life	1hr 46 mins

Legitimation through Vulnerabilising

A vital legitimation claim for preppers is that we are moving away from a market system and consumer society that is predicated on interdependence and complexity to a post-market, post-consumer moment that is characterised by independence and anti-infrastructural modes of living. Studies in consumer research have pointed to myriad strategies through which consumers articulate a 'jeremiad against consumption' as essentially corruptive (for a summary see Luedicke et al., 2010), and as a result find various ways to 'escape the market' (see, *inter alia*, Kozinets, 2002). These studies tend to find that consumers' escape cultivates a vision of alternative communitarianism in the face of the atomising effects of the marketplace. In contrast, this study finds that the prepper community espouses the former (i.e. distancing themselves from

market-consumption systems), while eschewing the latter. In other words, prepping does not produce a communitarian vision, but, rather, it entails the cultivation of trials of pre-emptive independence from nearly all forms of community. In contrast to much consumer research that characterises (alternative) community formation as a reaction against dominant, corruptive and malignant market hegemony (e.g. Üstüner and Thompson 2010), preppers experiment with exiting the market because of its inherent vulnerability to collapse.

This vulnerabilising is achieved in two distinct ways. First, preppers set a context of generalised precarity as a motivation to prepare. It is generally an *a priori* assumption within the community that market systems cannot override potential systemic weaknesses. Prepping arises from the cognitive, logical reasoning that *any* system that is complex and interdependent is to be feared, because in such a structure, any disaster has cascading effects. *El* lists such symptoms:

Growing population, the probability of zero retirement, shrinking incomes, reduction in welfare assistance, economic instability, rationed healthcare. In short; the degradation of previously accepted social expectations. If you cannot look after yourself, it's gonna be a rough ride.

Precisely because of its tight integration and interdependency, the market is rationalised as ultimately and imminently vulnerable. Narratives of generalised precarity are intertwined with major life events to document both the prepper's origin story and the transition from being under-prepared to a prepared individual. Such origin stories are often narrated as a 'road to Damascus' moment where the function of 'the Event' is to demonstrate how they were blind, working under false illusions of the reliability of the market, when something happens to expose

the chasm that exists under this illusory veil. Hindsight has allowed preppers a unique foresight. For *El*, it was a serious accident at work that opened his eyes to the importance of preparation:

The kids were young, wife not doing paid work as she was doing a more important job- looking after our toddlers. Boss refused to pay me and we were on the bare bones of our arses…I vowed then that the family would not sail that close to the wind again.

This strategy is similar to the epiphany or 'startling moment of clarity' that Handelsman and Kozinets (2004, p. 695) describe in their interviews with anti-consumption activists. Having recourse to a personal testimony lends the prepper the rationale to behave in what might be perceived as unconventional, from a consumer society perspective. This cathartic experience works to cultivate a new form of resilience. *El* continues:

When we got back on track, I got more (than I already was) into self-sufficiency. In came egg laying fowls, meat rabbits and even goats at one point. I took on two allotments as well as my large garden and hunted the crap out of the surrounding countryside. The food we did not have to buy meant money in the bank. I worked stupidly hard, as my goal was to be mortgage-free. That came.

Self-sufficiency has been analysed through an environmental sustainability lens or an identitarian mission towards voluntary simplicity in consumer research (e.g. Shaw and Newholm, 2002). Importantly, there is no conflation of self-sufficiency with environmental sustainability in our netnography. Self-sufficiency is instead observing one's dependency on the market, and

adjusting one's life to wean oneself off – a phenomenon we take up again later. This self-sufficiency extends itself to areas such as education and finance, where there is a dissonance between cognitive signals that loom and daily experience. For example, in interview *William* views the financial crisis of 2008 as an eye-opener to the vulnerability of the economy and its ability to look after him in old age:

I am never going to have a pension, the maths doesn't add up. It is not viable with current national insurance contributions. It is not a political ideology, I just don't think the government can look after me. It's not their fault. They haven't got the liquidity to subsidise that amount of people and the way we live right now.

Consequently, he has taken steps to withdraw his dependence on the market. *William* continues:

If I have to buy property, I buy in cash. I want the ability to be able to put up the drawbridge so to speak and pretend the world doesn't exist.

Legitimation through Common-sensing

'Common-sense' is the most valued currency in the prepper community. Common-sense is claimed in order to reject its opposite: paranoia. In the prepper community, every characteristic of the paranoiac that is attributed to the prepper is either rejected or recast as a practical application of rational thought. 'Paranoid' is the moniker the prepper is most keen to reject as it is a source of anxiety and keeps their behaviours under a cloak of secrecy and stigma. Preppers lean not on regulative (external sanction) or normative (socio-cultural) legitimacy as much as the

cognitive force of their argumentation, their reasoned explication of the 'just-isness' of the world. It is this vigilance that is implicit in preppers' definitions of common-sense. Prepping is thus re-framed in the community as the logical, common-sensical *extension* of established consumer behaviour. *Hugo* remarks in interview:

Let's say you decide you're going to start prepping. You're doing your weekly shop and instead of getting that one pack of whatever, you grab two. Go to the cereal aisle and see the ones you normally get are on offer, so you get two. You get the gist. Then you walk past the 'Home' section and pickup one of those clear storage containers to start putting this extra stuff in. Over a couple of weeks, you'll have put a weeks' worth of extra food in there, stick it in the attic/under the stairs.

A prepper is someone who simply understands the logic of being a 'savvy shopper'. As *Joan* remarks, 'You're either the sort of person who adds those things to your trolley, "just in case it happens again" or you're not.' *Hagen*, in interview, invoking the socially acceptable narratives of previous generations who placed less emphasis on material goods and made more from less, critiques the wastefulness of consumer society: 'Everything is possible with nothing.' *Lovet* (interview), emphasises fundamental cognitions as the basis of legitimacy: there are only three simple things in the world – water, shelter and fire – and they 'should be just common sense to people'.

Godfrey, like many others, expresses prepping as extremely logical responses to market signals:

To me, prepping, like another person above said, is just common sense:

I have money saved in case I lose my job, or have an unexpected expense

I have food stored in case I get snowed in (have done before)

I have water stored in case the water gets shut off

I have a way to generate electric when the power goes off

I have some weapons to protect myself, and also hunt with, because I like hunting

I have knives, torches, because they are cool, and I like gadgets, but they are also very handy.

Another way to wrest cognitive legitimacy from the dominant model of consumption is for the prepper to call themselves paranoid in the most hyperbolic way. This is often done through humour, especially through the emoji and trope of the zombie. Upon one interview, *Arthur* appears onscreen wearing a gas mask and full military regalia, leaving the interviewer speechless, then laughing. *Arthur* says nothing for a few moments, and then proceeds to laugh out loud, saying 'Nah, I'm much more normal that.' Humour functions to pre-emptively invite ridicule on one's own terms, so that it can be then cast off. This allows the prepper to list the worst types of accusations of not being a 'normal' consumer, in order to then control and refute the discourse. However, humour only functions for the insider to laugh at himself, not for the outsider to deploy: when the researcher makes a joke about a scenario posited to him on the community forum (getting trapped in a car in a snowstorm), he is reprimanded by members of the community, including the moderator *Edward*, who admonishes:

I'm all for a bit of flippancy but have you pondered the scenario presented and developed your own plan for such an eventuality? This sort of what-if exercise is essentially what being prepared

is all about. If you're still on the forum, perhaps you can share what you've considered and put into practice. If you don't have a car, then consider you're in a minibus or in a friend's car.

Common-sensing here helps preppers to enlist cognition as a superior form of legitimacy, and to cast themselves as boring, mundane, with shared commonalities with many mainstream welfare concerns, and thereby dispelling the stigma of the 'big catastrophe'. The participants react negatively to questions about potential black swan events. *Joan* is supported by other members of the forum as she derides the researcher in this instance when it is asked how one might protect themselves from nuclear fallout:

Ah...here we are. The let's talk about The End Of The World As We Know It because, after all, that's what all you nutters are preparing for isn't it?

In fact, this question releases a cascade of derision from the community; they recount their experience of journalists entering the community seeking to cast them in the most dramatic and exaggerated light, leaving them open, they perceive, to public ridicule. The media plays an important role here. While Humphreys and Thompson (2014) demonstrate how the media works to ideologically contain disasters by rendering them tameable, open to solution and discrete from each other, the media in the prepper's perception thrives on depicting worst-case scenarios, which by default ridicules preppers. *Bertrand* contributes here:

... but the truth is those mega disasters aren't what most of us prepare for, you'll find the odd thread where someone's preparation especially food etc., have tided them through rough times,

and that is where it is at, even though we pretty much all talk about major SHTF events, few of

us are anywhere near remote enough to stand a chance in those cases.

The mention of 'Big' catastrophes is regarded by the prepper community as bait to ridicule them, so they either react indignantly or with a pre-emptive humour (as in the cases above), or philosophically, projecting them into the far future as a way of legitimating their preparation for temporally nearer threats. *Arthur* (interview) demonstrates his unconcern with the existential threat of AI:

As far as I'm concerned it's evolution. We've evolved, and we've removed huge amounts of life off the planet to make way for us, so I mean if we evolve into something that is electronic, and it removes us from the planet to make way for itself, then, that's just, that's evolution isn't it. But something like that is going to take so long to come about that it's not something I think we have to worry about in our lifetime.

Legitimation through Othering

A repeated strategy within the prepper community is to separate sense from the non-sensical through othering. Othering is a generalised practice in identity construction which entails the creation of a dichotomy or essential difference ('me' versus 'you'), and the attribution of negative characteristics to the non-identical, which, paradoxically, is constitutive of one's wholeness. Othering as a process was extensively theorised in post-structural philosophies of identity starting in the 1970s, and has been explored in myriad studies of consumer identity legitimation strategies (see Bartels and Urminsk, 2011 and Sandikci and Ger, 2010).

A necessary legitimising strategy of the prepper is to thus frame the non-prepper as 'Other'. There are three major 'Others' in our netnography, which we call the *Dependent Civilian*, the *Neighbour*, and *the American Paranoiac*.

Dependency for preppers is complex and multi-faceted; it is most often described as someone who has an unjustified belief in market and consumption systems. As *El* states:

Most folks drift through life, and expect the shops to be open and full, the doctor to be there... But things are changing, it's a Brave New World. And it ain't pretty.

Hagen, in interview, expounds a generalised scepticism in all major institutions, not because they are inherently malign, but because they are unable to perceive systemic risk:

The key institutions cannot be trusted. The schools have not provided the correct preparation for real-life problems and potential emergencies. The Gardaí [police] don't know what they are doing. The government is responsible for poverty, the housing crisis and the recession. If anything bad does happen the government will only look after themselves.

Arthur, in interview, is keen to construct the non-prepared as shockingly ignorant of the world around them. With a profession in cyber-security, one thing he claims to do is enter the physical premises of his client, 'pick a computer up and just walk out with it. And nobody will even

bother looking my way. I mean, wear a high vis vest, or carry a clipboard, and you can walk around anywhere in a building most of the time.'

The Dependent Civilian is variously oblivious, dilettantish, complacent and trusting, while the prepper is watchful, with preparation a type of foresight that is missing in ordinary consumers: *Joan* tells of a scenario where there is a power cut and the hypothetical victim stumbles around looking for a candle, to no avail. So, the next time they are in the supermarket, they buy candles. There is another power cut:

But you now have illumination. You feel proud. You pose a glass of whisky next to the Christmas candle in an artful manner, take a photo on your phone and Whatsapp it round your friends and they Whatsapp their power cut photos back to you.

Importantly, *Joan* indicates with this thought experiment the difference between the 'prepper' and the 'prepared consumer'. Even if one is 'prepared', being a prepper is different as it is an attitudinal state that does not regard a power failure as a temporary**,** funny breakdown in an otherwise perfectly functioning system. It is rather a progenitor of things to come, a symptom and not an anomaly.

In the struggle for legitimacy, the prepper seeks to stage the *Dependent Civilian* as abnormal. However, in contrast to extant studies of communities that exist outside of dominant consumer systems, preppers are not evangelical about this ideological stance. Importantly, they do not seek to convert the dominant order; in fact, our netnography suggests that preppers are waiting for the

'I told you so' moment. Preppers stage the Other as the 'normal' consumer that laughs at them, but – lazy, oblivious, over-trusting in the market system – they must turn to the prepper in their hour of need. Similar to Luedicke et al. (2010), the identity work of preppers is resourced by the mythic framework of the 'moral protagonist' that provides ideological guidance, ascribes morally redemptive meanings, and sets a stage for confrontation with a dominant order. We elaborate this character by pointing to a vital and productive myth that tacitly sustains preppers from the famous fable from Aesop of the Grasshopper and the Ant. The Grasshopper dances and sings during the summer while the industrious ants conserve and plan for the winter. When the winter arrives, the desperate Grasshopper prevails upon their bounty, but is told to go and dance. This is a major structuring myth in the imaginary of preppers, subtly recast to make the Grasshopper a little worse (in critiques of Aesop, the Grasshopper is the Artist in a world of commercial meanness and efficiency), and the Ant a little better (in the prepper re-tellings, those that are prepared for the winter share their preparations with others). *Joan*, for example, tells of a hypothetical scenario where the local council notifies the community there will be water cuts:

The neighbour rings your bell. Do you have any water? The taps don't seem to be working and they have a baby who needs its bottle making up. You say, 'Did you not get the leaflet?', and you give them one of your 5L bottles of water. 'Ooh you were prepared' they respond. 'Not really, it's just common sense'.

Siegfried reacts to this post, adding,
Hahahaha - I recognise this so much. I occasionally go to fairly remote places for work and people would laugh at what I was carrying until they needed a really strong painkiller/piece of

gaffer tape/mosquito coil. You might get an initial reputation as a bit of an eccentric but they

pretty soon start turning to you when something happens!

However, this depiction of the prepper as munificent in the ashes of consumer collapse is

ambivalent, and there is an implicit subtext in that it is your neighbour who presents the ultimate

threat. *Arthur* (interview) worries,

If I go yabbering that I have all these fancy preps it makes you more, let's say, interesting, to

people when they have nothing and there is no food in the shops. He continues later*: The forum*

for example is a great place to get together anonymously and not worry about details being

passed around. Bottom line, keep yourself to yourself, only tell family/close friends that you prep.

For *Arthur*, talking about his fellow community members: 'I don't think I'd really want any of

them knowing where I was.' Research has tended to observe how the process of stigmatisation

fuels an intensity of community (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995; Ustüner and Thompson,

2012; Harju and Huovinen, 2015), even when that community is heterogeneous in its aims and

visions (Chalmers et al., 2012). Thus, interestingly, there is another subtle evolution of the myth:

while the complacent consumer masses are marginalised and characterised as weak, other

preppers are not regarded as an industrious whole community but regard their 'kin' with

suspicion. We will return to the oxymoron of a non-communitarian community in the discussion

section.

Othering is also manifest in prepper perceptions of different parts of the wider prepping

community. Bushcraft, an aspect of prepping that specifically focuses on wilderness survival

skills is a topic of much discussion within the forums. However, a number of our interviewees viewed the recent popularity of bushcraft as evidence of a less serious 'hipsterisation' of the prepping lifestyle that focuses more on the identitarian and hedonic aspects of prepping rather than the more serious business of survival where the focus must always be on shelter, water and fire. *Bedivere* (interview) characterises, bushcraft:

It is *the PC version of survival. In bushcraft they carve spoons and do arty farty things that won't help with survival.*

*Lovet, (*interview) expresses his unease with the *'weekend warriors'* and '*average hipster guy[s]'* who go out at weekends to practice bushcraft. Finally, our participants were also at pains to distinguish the European prepper culture from an *American Paranoiac* culture. As *Galahad* muses:

The word itself is American, I'm pretty sure, and so is the concept – and the associated concepts that go along with it, the whole Second Amendment right to bear arms, the suspicion that the government is setting up camps and is ready to ban/confiscate all sorts of goods.

This perceived distance from what are regarded as the overt political, religious and misogynistic textures of US prepper culture is important for the participants. *El* crystallises this:

Well, let's assume you are not looking for Doomsday Preppers. Search the web for them- there are several UK sites and DOZENS of US sites that harbour the whackos. We weed them out

swiftly, and they congregate elsewhere. They exist, but are far from representative of the mainstream prepper community [here].

Hugo, in interview, makes an implicit nod to the weaponised culture of prepping in US by impersonating what he perceives to be the exaggerated reaction of American culture: 'oh yeah, like I've got to have 500 assault weapons in my bag when I go up town… just in case, you know.' For the European prepper, American culture is highly militarised, which inflects its prepper imaginary with fortress-building, bombastic, possession-focussed strivings. *Lovet* (interview) distinguishes the two cultures by attributing possession to the latter and skill-building to the former, and warns: 'Don't stockpile food, stockpile skills … The more you know, the less you have to carry. Preppers in America have no skills'.

This more politicised American version of prepping culture is seen as a potential de-legitimising threat to the common-sensing narrative that the participants project. *William* (interview) argues:

The average prepper in America is severely underprepared as they only focus on what is fashionable; social upheaval, riots etc. where the real issues lay in underemployment, financial risk and social security. It is about being anti-fragile.

Legitimation through Unblackboxing

Blackboxing is a term that was coined in sociology of science studies to describe the ways in which systems and objects, especially technological ones, move from being open to discussion, debate, controversy, physical interference, to gradual physical and discursive concealment. In

this context, 'unblackboxing' refers to the way in which preppers seek to legitimate prepper practices as more authentic, more resilient and more knowledgeable than consumer society, producing thus an alternative expert system that will outlast the dominant one. An initial manoeuvre in this legitimation practice is to indicate a distrust of institutions/expert systems. As we mentioned above, this is not an explicit distrust that can be attributed to a specific system or actor (a malfunctioning water supply, or a corrupted government), but a generalised risk that the entire system on which market exchange is based is structurally unsound. *Galahad* elaborates:

You'll probably see it written around the forum - quite a few people on here (including me) are pretty sure that during the economic crash ten years or so ago, the can was only kicked down the road, the structural problems weren't sorted. Which means that some kind of financial crisis could erupt once again.

The market is seen as suffering from both complexity and interdependency; this has made it open to system weakness. It is then marked by an event which stages this dynamic as problematic, and an orientation towards either cultivating, strengthening or reviving skills, physical infrastructures, material objects and physical and mental states that will permit a distance from the market and its structural vulnerabilities. Preppers' previous experience with market failures activates a strong desire for precautionary trials of divestiture, leanness and independency. Consequently, objects become unblackboxed. *Robert* reflects on this:

Imagine the supermarket on a Saturday morning and a fridge catching fire belching black smoke out and a big bang and fire ball as the masses try to escape. And later: *But seriously we all see*

fire extinguishers in every shop / bar / school/ work etc. but how many could use one in a

demonstration? but then in a panic (never mind selecting the correct one) most become all

fingers and thumbs...

The *masses*, those Dependent Civilians, would be terrified, but the prepper is anticipatorily

trained to respond. The prepper perceives the technical depth of ordinary objects, but it is a

different type of technological savvy: one achieves legitimacy by demonstrating an ability to see

the mechanics of technology, not its mediated, consumer interface. Even every-day consumer

objects have a different, deeper resonance through the prepper's gaze: the house becomes a fort,

food becomes survival, there is a doubling-up of uses for objects. For *Lovet*, in interview, the bin

bag is identified as one of the most important objects he won't leave the house without:

I always carry two or three bin bags so I can make shelter no matter where I go. One of the bin

bags can be used to make a roof and I could fill the others with leaves to create comfort and

heat.

Arthur takes out a torch, shows it to the interviewer, and says:

I've got this...that's my torch, pretty standard little thing. But you see these pointy ends, that's

an impact weapon, they're pretty sharp, so it's just that little bit of protection. So, I've got my

torch in my hands and somebody's coming at you giving you a hard time, you can shine this in

their eyes and give them a whack with this, and, it's legal to carry.

A common ideology of technology is that it has become consumer-centric, mediated, has lulled us into a false sense of our capabilities (e.g. Kozinets, 2008). Preppers frontload their self-descriptions by show-casing their technical skill, from Faraday cages to shock blankets and infrastructure such as UK government disaster planning protocols. *Technical* skill is different from *technological* skill – in other words, the prepper emphatically distances themselves from ordinary people who simply and passively use the interfaces of Google and Whatsapp. They list their credentials in getting under and behind technical systems, whether it's engineering, cyber-security or lock-picking. For example, when *Joan* responds to the researcher with irritation when asked about nuclear threat, she both distances prepping from the nuclear threat undertones and simultaneously demonstrates a depth of knowledge about nuclear technology:

Do you even know how many VEI8 eruptions there have ever been on the earth without running off and googling it? When the last one was? Has there ever been a VEI7 in recorded history? What happened in 1815 (besides the Battle of Waterloo)? Why 1816 was known as The Year Without Summer? Research what the actual blast area is for a 1 or 5 megaton hydrogen bomb, not just what you've seen on the telly. Indeed, research what the difference is between an atomic bomb, a hydrogen bomb and a neutron bomb, and how they are and are not any different from conventional bombs.

As a civilian, the consumer is not prepared in the face of crisis, but the prepper engages in pilot uses of their 'preps' to train in worlds without markets. *Janet*, in interview, lives by the mantra that 'the greater the need, the greater the result', and this need can only be tested through placing oneself in uncomfortable situations. *Hugo* (interview) recounts such a pilot:

2 months ago, I went a weekend without power in my house. I flipped the power off on Saturday morning and had my preps to rely on. I was making my meals on a gas camping stove, using water I'd stockpiled to flush the loo (that got boring after day 1) and warmed water to use with the camping shower in place of my actual shower.

Arthur (interview), like many preppers, carries preps on his person, to and from work:
I would just carry what I would normally bring to work, like I wear a waistcoat and it's got loads of pockets that I wear underneath a suit which has my tools and that in it. Like I've got lock picks, I've got a torch, with work, I'd normally carry camera gear as well, a walkie talkie, radio...

A prepper gaze thus transforms one's relation to the market system and consumer society: far from being a smart city with its interconnected and highly functioning infrastructure and rule of law, it is transformed into a jungle where the lone prepper negotiates manifold dangers. Unblackboxing is not just a critique of the consumer-technology interface, but it is a reviving of skills, materialities and practices that are perceived to have existed before a consumer society. This anchor of authority is supported by their appreciation and knowledge of 'previous generations' which are often used to further promote the common-sensing narrative:

My Grandad remembered life before the Welfare State. He still had two allotments and kept fowls and rabbits right till his death. He said that the Welfare State would never last, and folks would 'get soft in that time. (El)

Preppers evoke a higher technical wisdom that inheres in primitive technologies and skills, particularly fire-making. The primitive lifestyle is almost fetishised because of the simplicity that the lack of choice provides. However, *Lovet*, in interview, is keen to stress how difficult it is to master basic survival skills:

I am a leading authority in fire-making. I have been practising this most of my life. The more you know, the less you need to carry. I always carry five different methods of making fire. I use the mantra of PACE (primary and contingency and emergency). I always carry a lighter, Ferrocerium rod and a smaller rod around my neck.

These are preps that have to be practised in the harsh conditions of the woods. 'You can't ever be truly prepared or master skills related to perseverance unless you put yourself in conditions where it is on the line'. However, *Lovet* argues that the world we live in is too comfortable for the non-prepper to learn these skills and that 'people need to learn to get comfortable being un-comfortable.'

The data here include descriptions of bivvying, composting and field-craft, while other online prepper communities include longer- and wider-ranging discussions on archery, wild edible gardening, water-purifying, knot-making, vermiculture and orienteering. Prepping affords the quilting together of diverse interests, skills and materials. *Galahad* elaborates:

I like that prepping is wide-ranging – I have a lot of interests, and some of them are quite isolated from one another. Prepping brings a few of them together. I like online research, for instance.

Unblackboxing is the attempt to expose consumer-orientation as cosseting and ultimately paralysing. Preppers' ways of getting behind and deep into pre-consumer society objects and practices is a way to make a higher moral appeal to 'wisdom' over 'expertise'. Expertise is the stuff of the market, whereas wisdom is the stuff that cannot be captured by the market. One of the common things we see is the appropriation of proverbs, aphorisms and quotes into one's own branded post-market wisdom, ranging from the anonymous, e.g. 'التَكْرَارُ يُعَلِّمُ الحِمار◌َ' ('Repetition teaches the donkey') to the poetic: 'Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass, it's about learning to dance in the rain' to more militaristic 'Fail to prepare, prepare to fail' (a common prepper quote attributed to Benjamin Franklin).

Table 3 below summarises the important ways legitimacy theory has been extended and applied in consumer research in the center column. The right-hand column, points to some of the ways that prepping develops our understanding of less explored areas in the field.

Table 3: Overview of legitimation treatment in consumer research

Legitimation	Work in consumer research	Prepper legitimation
Source of legitimacy	Normative (socio-cultural) and regulative (external, institutional) legitimacy	Cognitive legitimacy
Approach to the market	The market is hegemonic	The market is vulnerable
Contract with society/institution	Community is a resource	Non-communitarian

Teleology	Self-sufficiency (resilience) is for the greater good (i.e. sustainability)	Self-sufficiency (resilience) is about individual survival, not the environment
Authorisation	The marginalised system variously resists, co-opts, or re-signifies dominant market meanings and signals	The marginalised system logically *extends* dominant market signals
Socio-cultural norms	Seek to avoid stigma	Invite stigma to pre-empt ridicule
Source of capital	Concerned with symbolic and cultural capital	Concerned with economic capital
Circulation of form	Seeks to recruit others (broadening the base)	Seeks to eventually triumph over others
Ideology of technology	Technology is the means	Technology is the end

Discussion: It's the End of the World (but not as we know it)

Are we graced with, or condemned to, a consumer society that will last forever? Although an abstract question, it constitutes the frontier, or outer limits to our field. Prepping is an empirical site through which this question can be explored, in the absence of any crystal ball that foretells the future of the market system. Our netnography of a European prepper community sought to understand how preppers legitimate their lifestyles and visions of a post-market, post-consumer society. We found four prevailing modes of legitimation amongst preppers. The first is *vulnerabilising*, whereby the prepper establishes a generalised precarity that inheres in complex systems, uses personal testimony to describe a chasm between appearance and reality, and advocates for new modes of post-market resilience. The second is *common-sensing*, namely the wresting of the cognitive legitimacy from the dominant consumer model, demonstrating how prepping is a logical extension of market signals. The third is *othering*, whereby the non-prepper is variously constructed as (i) a complacent, dependent, oblivious civilian, (ii) a kin, (iii) an Americanised extreme. The final legitimation mode is *unblackboxing*, which is a complex of strategies used to argue for a difference between technicity and technology – the latter a

degraded, passive, 'consumer-centric' way of engaging with products, services and systems, and the former a mode of stripping away the interface and attempting to understand the (multi-) functionality of products, services and systems.

Exploring the motivations and experiences of preppers can offer important insights into how people envision post-market systems and post-consumer societies, and they warrant more attention from scholars in the field. In contrast to other groups that use consumption as a means to 'defend the system' when it is threatened, or who use it to 'escape the market', inadvertently creating ancillary markets, preppers clearly oscillate between the comfort and the illusion of consumer objects. In other words, consumer objects are both too important and not important enough. They are stockpiled and re-purposed, they are put into scenarios where they can be literally life-saving, and yet there is hardly a community who more wearily and presciently regards them as fallible and ephemeral as the prepper community. Further research is needed to explore this ontological dimension of objects, particularly in the community's emblematic objects of the bug-out-bag (BOB) and the bunker.

Further, the prepper community that we engaged with points to an interesting dynamic within the structure of a community. Preppers engage in precautionary practices and behaviours as forms of anticipatory divestiture. Their family is their natural unit of community, but they make use of an online community of like-minded individuals for all the forms of support that are well-documented in extant consumer research (e.g. Schau et al., 2009; Canniford, 2011). However, in our research, preppers regard each other with extreme caution, if not outright suspicion. They go to considerable lengths to anonymise their identity and location from each other; they are

hesitant to give each other detail on their stockpiles and preps; they do not advance a group ethic. As we indicated earlier, this is a distinctly non-communitarian community. We use this term to distinguish it from Tumbat and Belk's (2011) 'liminal camaraderie', where the authors, acknowledging that consumption experiences are traditionally framed as communal enterprises, find that consumers can be individualistic and competitive within a community. However, preppers do not pretend to provide support outside of information exchange. They engage in the practices of community (e.g. 'self-sufficiency') without the attendant communitarian ethos (i.e. 'sustainability'). The Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito perhaps describes this dynamic best as the 'absent center of community', in his own attempts to deconstruct the apparent conceptual opposition of community and nihilism, questioning why the former seems to be a full substance and the latter an annihilating nothingness (2006; 2009).

Further research is also needed to explore why others who have similar life events do not react in a similar way. While the eccentricities of the wealthy prepper have been the focus of popular culture (see O'Connell, 2018), there is little said about prepping in non-elite circumstances. As the practice of prepping evolves, many other differences in what might seem to be a monolithic subculture will become apparent. Our data here suggests a contrast with American prepper culture, reported in scholarly and popular accounts to be more militarised, misogynistic, Christian, and subject to quintessentially American structuring myths of the frontier. Again, more research is needed to investigate the degree to which national cultures inform people's preparedness.

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