Tournaments of Destruction: Consumers Battling for Visibility

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Abstract

This research introduces tournaments of destruction, defined as staged and ritualized social performances involving entertainment and competitive rivalry in which consumers destroy valued material objects before a focused gathering. The conceptualization of tournaments of destruction is borne from a qualitative, phenomenological-based case study of low-income, low-power Black African male youth, who as members of the Izikhothane subculture in Soweto, South Africa, battle powerless anonymity by engaging in conspicuous consumption and the counterintuitive conspicuous destruction of high-end Italian apparel brands. Alexander's theory of social performance provides an enabling lens to explore tournaments of destruction within a system of meanings, and findings provide insights about motivation to participate in a destructive subculture, the social performance of tournaments of destruction, and the agency and navigation of visibility within their hyper-local community. Emergent themes of spatiotemporal visibility, intentionality of destruction, focused gatherings and collective effervescence, and sociomoral condemnation contribute to understanding tournaments of destruction and other destructive enactments by social collectives both in pre-market and contemporary societies. This research extends Alexander's theory of social performance and provides grounding for future work on destruction and visibility within contemporary consumer culture.

Keywords: destruction, social performance, potlatch, social power, conspicuous consumption

> I had my Arbiter [Italian high-end brand] shoes. I said to him, 'Look at what you have stepped on. It's not just any shoes.' That's when I saw that this guy has this power that I don't understand. And, we started tearing our t-shirts. It is to show how you don't care about this shirt because you have more…[My crew members] were wearing our purple brand t-shirts called "Serial Killer" t-shirts which cost R700 [$55]. I had to tear it apart, and I did…He ran to his crew, and he never come back. [ID 35]

> I will then prove that I am bigger than you. I will burn my clothes. Then I will show you … that I am going to change and put on new clothes. I am showing that I don't struggle with clothes, and I will buy more quality clothes tomorrow. That's what Izikhothane are all about. [ID 39]

The impoverished members of the Izikhothane (pronounced Iz-ee-khō-taw-nee) Black African male youth subculture in Soweto, South Africa, are noted for their extravagances and swagger, as well as for their conspicuous display and destruction of high-end Italian fashion brands during potlatch-like social performances (Chipp, Kapelianis, and Mkhwanazi 2016; Mnisi 2019). Izikhothane social performances are ritualized competitive rivalries referred to as "battles" where members of vying crews (subgroups of 10 to 20) congregate in an identified "territory," and they, along with the audience, form a circle, encompassing the "battlefield." The battle has a dramatic narrative where individual crew members first compete with their opposing crew counterparts in rap, brand showmanship, and dance (Singer 2019), and then engage in ritualized destructive enactments where "destroyers" throw bleach, expensive liquor, and/or liquid custard on the rival's

high-end Italian branded clothing and shoes. Within the focused gathering (other crew members, members of other Izikhothane crews, and community youth), amid cheers and collective effervescence (Durkheim 1912/1995; Rimé and Páez 2023), destroyers, battling for visibility, must decide whether they need to destroy their *own* expensive fashion brands, by burning or otherwise and/or burn money, to win approval of the adjudicating audience (Capron 2013; Chipp et al. 2016; Crosswaite 2014; Mchunu 2017; Mnisi 2015).

What are these tournaments of destruction, and what do they mean for our understanding of destructive enactments as social performances by social collectives? Our research is grounded in the Izikhothane subculture, comprised of youth who vie for visibility in their local community. We offer an understanding of individuals experiencing powerless anonymity, as members of a social collective in the contemporary marketplace and their participation in destructive social performances. Notably, our work makes three significant contributions. First, we introduce the construct, *tournament of destruction*, conceptualized as a staged and ritualized social performance involving entertainment and competitive rivalry in which consumers destroy valued material objects before a focused gathering ("a set of persons engrossed in a common flow of activity and relating to one another in terms of that flow," Goffman 1961, 9–10). The socioeconomic and historical context in contemporary society in which the Izikhothane live renders them largely invisible, and as such, their participation in tournaments of destruction offers them a chance to be visible, that is, to be seen, validated, and acknowledged in their hyper-local space. To further explicate tournaments of destruction, what they are and what they are not, we blend and contrast insights from our research with conceptual and empirical work on social performances (Alexander 2004; Arnould and Price 2000; Deighton 1992; Kozinets 2002; Östberg 2011), tournaments of value (Appadurai 1986), potlatch (Boas 1920, 1924; Codere 1950), and deep play (Geertz 1973).

Second, our work advances Alexander's *theory of social performance* (2004) to explore destruction as a social performance. Alexander (2004, 529) defines social performance as the "social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation," including the intrinsically related elements: systems of collective representation (i.e., background symbols, foreground scripts), actors, means of symbolic production, performance observers, *mise-en-scène*, and social power. In this research, we acknowledge the social collective as an organizing principle of social life that facilitates social structure and individual action thereby constructing meaning within a socio-historical context (Spillman 2020, 54). Our work employs a qualitative, phenomenological-based case study of the Izikhothane (focus groups and depth interviews), supplemented by academic work and popular press (Chipp et al. 2016; Mnisi 2015). Leveraging social performance as a systems of meanings and social dynamics and taking a socio-historical-cultural approach, we explore the counterintuitive practices where low-income, low-power consumers purchase and then destroy others' and potentially their *own* high-end apparel brands in tournaments of destruction. Thus, we provide insights about: 1) the motivations for participating in a "destroying" social collective, 2) the meaning and appropriation of high-end Italian brands and partaking in destructive social performances (i.e., their initiation, enactment, and adjudication) for purposes of visibility, and 3) the epilogue of tournaments of destruction; that is, the agency of visibility and negotiated visibility within their hyper-local community.

Third and importantly, our work contributes by offering a broader conceptualization of destructive enactments by social collectives in pre-market and contemporary societies. Anthropologists and sociologists extensively document potlatch ceremonies in pre-market societies, where privileged tribal leaders in the Pacific Northwest and Global South, paradoxically destroyed or redistributed valued material objects (Boas 1920, 1924; Codere 1950; Malinowski

1922; Mauss 1950/1990). Consumer research scholars have studied affluent young Stockholm Brats, who buy expensive alcohol at bars and spit it at one another or instruct the bartender to pour the liquor down the drain (Östberg 2011), and attendees destroying their own art during the Burning Man festival (Hansen 2023; Kozinets 2002). Other scholarly work recognizes destruction of public property by subcultures and street gangs (Hagedorn 2007, 2008; Hebdige 1979) and graffiti crews (Bloch 2019; Macdonald 2001). Our examination of Izikhothane and these other social collectives reveals four emergent themes related to destructive enactments: spatiotemporal visibility, the intentionality of destruction, focused gatherings and collective effervescence, and sociomoral condemnation, and we discuss how these themes are enacted (or not) in tournaments of destruction and other destructive enactments by social collectives. Thus, our work brings necessary attention to destruction as a multi-faceted conspicuous social performance and extends Alexander's (2004) theory of social performance which heretofore has focused on hedonic and symbolic performances.

In the following section, we explore destructive enactments by social collectives in pre-market and contemporary market societies to situate our conceptualization of tournaments of destruction. Next, we describe our multimethod, longitudinal research program studying the Izikhothane, detailing our primary data collections in 2015 and 2018. We then proceed with our findings and a discussion of the emergent themes. To conclude, we offer future directions for scholarly inquiry, such that consumer research might continue to incorporate perspectives on destruction to complement the vast work on acquisition and consumption processes

TOURNAMENTS OF DESTRUCTION AND DESTRUCTIVE PERFORMANCES BY SOCIAL COLLECTIVES

Drawing upon work in pre-market societies and contemporary consumer culture, this section examines destructive enactments by social collectives regarding the five elements of *tournaments of destruction*: 1) staged and ritualized destructive performance, 2) competitive rivalry, 3) entertaining performance, 4) destruction of material objects, and 5) focused gathering. Following on our introductory overview and as shown on table 1, the Izikhothane "battle" in the contemporary marketplace embodies our conceptualization of tournaments of destruction (Capron 2013; Chipp et al. 2016; Crosswaite 2014; Mchunu 2017; Mnisi 2015); in our findings, we unfold details of Izikhothane and their tournaments of destruction within the enabling lens of Alexander's (2004) theory of social performance. Table 1 also provides a summary of the destructive enactments of five other social collectives; two in pre-market society including potlatch ceremonies (Boas 1920, 1924; Codere 1950; Malinowski 1922) and deep play associated with Balinese cockfights (Geertz 1973), and four in the contemporary marketplace including Stockholm Brats (Östberg 2011), Burners (Hansen 2023; Kozinets 2002), graffiti art crews (Macdonald 2001; Visconti et al. 2010), and gangs (Covey 2010; Franzese, Covey, and Menard 2016; Glasser 2000, 2018), to fully discern and explicate tournaments of destruction, revealing what they are and what they are not.

TABLE 1

SOCIAL COLLECTIVES ENGAGED IN TOURNAMENTS OF DESTRUCTION AND DESTRUCTIVE ENACTMENTS

Social Collectives Engaged in Destructive Enactments	**Elements of a Tournament of Destruction**					**Tournament of Destruction**
	Staged/ritualized destructive performance	Competitive rivalry	Entertaining performance	Destruction of material objects	Focused gathering	
Izikhothane[b]	• Yes – Battle	• Yes – Concurrent	• Yes – Dissing, dancing, and destruction	• Yes – Others' and owned high-end Italian branded apparel and cash.	• Yes – Local audience (open to all), other crews	• Yes
Kwakiutl and Other Indigenous Tribes[c]	• Yes – Potlatch	• Yes – Sequential	• Yes – Singing, dancing, storytelling, feasting	• Yes – Owned material goods (canoes, kula, trinkets, blankets)	• Yes – Invited tribal members and friendly tribes	• Yes
Balinese Cock Owners[d]	• Yes – Cockfight	• Yes – Concurrent	• Yes – Cockfight	• Yes – Owned cocks	• Yes – Local audience	• Yes
Stockholm Brats[e]	• No	• No	• No	• Yes – Owned high-end alcohol	• No	• No
Burning Man Participants[f]	• No	• No	• No	• Yes – Owned art	• Potentially	• No
Graffiti Art Crews[g]	• No	• Yes – Sequential and concurrent	• Yes – Presuming graffiti art is "entertaining"	• Yes – Public property	• No	• No
Street Gangs[h]	• No	• Yes – Concurrent	• No	• Yes – Public and others' personal property	• Potentially	• No

[a]Each element of a tournament of destruction is assessed for each social collective; the last column is an assessment of whether the destructive enactment is or is not a tournament of destruction. Izikhothane tournaments of destruction are discussed in Findings, "Initiation, Enactment, and Adjudication of Tournaments of Destruction."

[b]Capron 2013; Chipp et al. 2016; Crosswaite 2014; Glaser 2000, 2018; Mchunu 2017; Mnisi 2015.

[c]Boas 1920, 1924; Codere 1950; Mauss 1950/1990; Ridsdale 1997.

[d]Geertz 1973.

[e]Borneskog 2011; Östberg 2011.

[f]Hansen 2023; Kozinets 2002.

[g]Macdonald 2001; Visconti et al. 2010.

[h]Covey 2010; Franzese et al. 2016; Hagedorn 2007, 2008.

Potlatch practices, enacted by indigenous tribes of the Pacific Northwest (Kwakiutl, Coast Salish, Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimshian) and of Polynesia and Melanesia (where the practice was known as the "kula"), are an exemplar of tournaments of destruction in pre-market society. Potlatch, "a total system of giving," involves obligations to reciprocate presents received, give presents, and receive presents, as well as destructive enactments (Mauss 1950/1990). In the mid-19th century, indigenous tribes, organized as hierarchical kinship-based networks, engaged in potlatch or kula ceremonies; this "gift economy" (see also Giesler 2006; Weinberger, Baskin, and Gunasti forthcoming) managed the social power structure within the social collective. Wealthy tribal chiefs introduced potlatch ceremonies in a staged setting, characterized by ritualized practices of feasting and entertainment, including singing, dancing, and storytelling, among tribesmen and invited guests (Boas 1920, 1924; Codere 1950; Mauss 1950/1990; Ridsdale 1997). During the potlatch, which lasted several days, the tribal chief sought to reinforce his rank within his tribe and the local tribal community by gifting amassed livestock, foodstuffs, and other iconic representations of wealth (e.g., blankets, woven baskets, coppers, and canoes) (Appadurai 1986; Boas 1920, 1924; Codere 1950; Graeber 2001; Spillman 2020). The affluent chief also performed intentional ritualized destruction, including burning owned valued material objects or "returning" them to the sea as a sacrifice to the gods, with the concomitant belief that the gods would continue to bless the tribal members with future riches (Boas 1920, 1924; Codere 1950; Mauss 1950/1990; Sahlins 1963). Notably, chiefs within the tribe engaged in sequential potlatches where they tried to outdo the destruction and distribution of wealth by the chief in a prior potlatch.

Cockfights, a type of blood sport or combat sport, in which owners agree to staged events, pitting animals (cocks, dogs, bulls) against one another provides a second exemplar of tournaments of destruction documented in pre-market society. Geertz's work in Bali in 1958 examined

cockfights which served as culturally symbolic and ritualized displays of masculinity and a dramatization of social position (Geertz 1973). Although cockfights were illegal, they occurred most days as regularly orchestrated staged, entertainment performances by wealthy cock owners (Geertz 1973). An engaged audience formed the "battlefield," consisting of concentric circles, and the cockfight began when the handlers placed their cocks, fitted with razor-sharp spurs of four to five inches attached to their claws, in the battlefield. Umpires adjudicated the ritualized enactments. Geertz interprets these cockfights as *deep play* because the "stakes are so high that it is irrational for men to engage at all" (Geertz 1973, 432). Low-income locals participated as audience members both to enjoy their time and to escape from everyday life experiences; they wagered bets on "shallow" (small amounts) and "deep" (large amounts) cockfights with the match culminating when one cock killed the other. For the betting locals, honor, dignity, and respect were at stake in the moment. Geertz argues that the cockfights provide a broader "metasocial commentary…of assorting human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks and then organizing the major part of collective existence around that assortment" (Geertz 1973, 448).

Research documents that members of social collectives in contemporary consumer culture also engage in destructive enactments and therefore might be considered tournaments of destruction. For example, the Stockholm Brats' social performance involves the destruction of high-end alcohol brands for shock and awe, to tout their affluence, and to differentiate themselves from their more minimalist parents (Östberg 2011). The Burning Man Festival has evolved over the past two decades, and affluent participants, as a statement of anti-consumption and for potential acknowledgement by others in this temporary community, destroy their own art (Hansen 2023; Kozinets 2002). Despite the destructive enactments of Brats and Burners being likened to potlatch (Kozinets 2002; Östberg 2011), neither is a tournament of destruction; their social performances

lack entertainment and competitive rivalry among groups. Graffiti crews represent another contemporary social collective engaged in destructive enactments as they concurrently entertain through the production of their art and destroy public and privately-owned property, intentionally breaking the law, placing graffiti "tags" in unusual or high-profile locations in their quest for visibility (Macdonald 2001; Visconti et al. 2010). Yet, they lack ritual and presence of a focused gathering and thus should not be classified as a tournament of destruction. A final example in contemporary consumer culture is the competing street gangs and performative subcultures (e.g., the Mods and the Rockers) that engage in acts of destruction or violence (planned or randomly) toward one another, against humanity, or regarding others' material possessions (Covey 2010; Franzese et al. 2016; Glaser 2000, 2018). Seeking visibility within a hyper-local community (Hagedorn 2007, 2008), these destructive enactments lack ritualized entertainment and a focused gathering and thus should not be considered tournaments of destruction.

OVERVIEW AND RESEARCH PROGRAM

Our research provides a unique opportunity to explore tournaments of destruction situated within a socio-cultural-historical perspective as engaged in by Izikhothane, a low- income, low-power youth subculture in contemporary South Africa. Our work employs a qualitative, phenomenological-based case study drawing upon a multimethod, longitudinal research program, with primary data collections in 2015 and 2018, and complemented by secondary data from popular press, social media outlets, and academic work. Our author team includes a South African scholar and co-authors who frequently traveled to South Africa. The team specified primary data collection efforts, including sampling frame (Izikhothane subculture members, at least 18 years of

age, representing a variety of crews), interview protocol development and refinement, and specification of interview logistics. The author team worked closely with INFUSION Knowledge Hub, a South African-based participatory research firm, familiar with local conventions and languages. Based on our criteria, the firm identified initial informants from their local network and used snowballing and network sampling to recruit additional informants (Arsel and Thompson 2011; Crockett 2017). Our South African co-author trained four Black female interviewers (aged 45–55) to conduct primary data collections and iteratively worked with them to refine our interview protocol and interviewers' probing techniques. For all 2015 and 2018 interviews and the 2015 focus group, an interviewer (and photographer in 2015) met the informant(s) at a location of their choosing (Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013). The interviewer assured informant confidentiality and interviewed in the informant's chosen language (English or Zulu), with translation to English as needed. For phrases in informants' mother tongues, which could not be translated to English or in case of contextual descriptions, interviewers provided explanations in the transcripts.

Additionally, we engaged a field team (three of our four INFUSION interviewers and one photographer/videographer) to attend an Izikhothane battle at Florida Lake, Soweto in June 2015. The team observed and took field notes reporting that what they observed involved no destruction, but rather crews competing and challenging one another with their style and dance moves, reflective that in 2015, Izikhothane social performances had begun to shift away from destructive enactments. Field notes were transcribed and included in the corpus of our data.

2015 Data Collection

In 2015, our research program included three data collections: preliminary depth interviews (n = 4), a focus group (n = 5), and depth interviews (n = 39). Informants received a R150 (South African Rand) [~$12; R12.09 = 1 USD in August 2015] shopping voucher for participation. For the preliminary depth interviews, as per our instructions, INFUSION used their community network to purposively identify four Izikhothane from different crews: Attractive Nike Conquerors, Attract, The Unexpected, and Golden Adidas Boys. The interviews started with grand-tour questions (McCracken 1988; Thompson and Tambyah 1999) around informants' life stories, family background, personal identity, and interests that brought them to their current circumstances, and then proceeded to discuss participation in Izikhothane. Informants provided a general understanding of Izikhothane, roles within the crew, rituals and practices regarding expensive brand acquisition, use, and destruction, as well as preparations and practices related to battles (154 single-spaced pages). Subsequently, INFUSION conducted a one-hour focus group (26 single-spaced pages) with five Izikhothane from the Steeze Addicts crew ("steeze" refers to a person's distinctive and attractive/impressive style of dress or way of doing things) to explore crew dynamics and practices.

These initial data collections, along with relevant academic literature and popular press on Izikhothane, were instructive in refining the depth interview protocol and interviewing techniques related to increased probing. Depth interviews with 39 Izikhothane from eight crews (902 single-spaced pages) began with grand-tour questions focused on their daily lived experiences (i.e., family structure, academic credentials, leisure activities, and future aspirations) and their

Izikhothane activities and rituals around the acquisition, consumption, and destruction of high-end clothing and shoe brands.

Table 2 provides individual characteristics for informants (ID 1 to ID 39 to protect anonymity) who range in age from 18 to 28. Their narratives relay varied familial conditions, from living with two working middle-class parents to living from couch to couch at the home of friends or extended family members. The majority (74%) were raised within a non-nuclear family, by a single-parent, often in multigenerational, matriarchal households with grandmothers playing influential roles. We did not ask our informants about family income, but reports indicate that Izikhothane are "largely from poor background and from cash-strapped parents," who are factory workers and work at the supermarkets" ("Burning Bling" 2012). Educationally, 16 of 39 of our informants (41%) are high school graduates, 15 were still enrolled in high school, five dropped out, and three did not disclose their educational status; thus, our informants as a group exceed the high school graduation rate in Soweto (estimated at 38 percent; "Soweto" 2022). Our informants' socio-economic characteristics (table 2) substantiate their low-income, low-power standing (Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2012). Table 2 also documents informants' diverse Izikhothane backgrounds, representing eight crews (per their affiliation at the time of the interview; crews are labeled A to H to protect informant anonymity; see footnote[a] for crew names). Informants had one- to ten-year affiliations with Izikhothane, with varied individualized roles within their crew (e.g., disser, dancer, financial manager, logistician, leader).

TABLE 2

INFORMANT PROFILES

Informant ID	2015 Interview						2018 Interview
	Individual profile			Izikhothane status			Subculture affiliation
	Age	High school status	Primary care giver	Crew [a]	Years affiliated	Crew role	
1	23	Graduate	Mother	A	8	Disser/rapper	Unaffiliated
2	ND	Dropout	Mother	A	3	Dancer	Unaffiliated
3	18	Student	Father	B	4	Financial manager, dancer	NC
4	19	Student	Mother	C	4	Leader	NC
5	21	Graduate	Mother	A	5	Financial manager, dancer	NC
6	24	Dropout	Mother	A	1	Dancer	Unaffiliated
7	23	Graduate	Mother	A	6	Leader, dancer	Transport crew
8	24	Graduate	Mother	A	9	Logistician	NC
9	20	Graduate	Mother	A	4	Dancer	NC
10	22	Graduate	Grandmother	D	5	ND	NC
11	18	Dropout	Both parents	E	8	ND	NC
12	21	Dropout	Grandmother	D	ND	Disser/rapper	NC
13	18	Graduate	Grandmother	C	8	Dancer	NC
14	20	Graduate	Grandmother	A	6	Logistician	NC
15	19	Student	Grandmother	B	3	Dancer	NC
16	20	Graduate	Other family	F	4	Leader	Unaffiliated
17	19	Student	Mother	F	3	Logistician	Unaffiliated
18	18	Graduate	Both parents	B	ND	Dancer	NC
19	23	Dropout	Mother	A	5	Dancer	Unaffiliated
20	21	Graduate	Both parents	G	5	Leader, Disser/ rapper	Refused
21	18	Student	Mother	A	3	Dancer	Unaffiliated
22	21	Graduate	Other family	G	6	Dancer, Disser /rapper	NC
23	20	Student	Both parents	H	5	Logistician	NC
24	21	Graduate	Grandmother	H	8	Disser/rapper	NC
25	21	Graduate	Both parents	A	3	Logistician	NC
26	19	Student	Mother	F	3	ND	NC
27	ND	Student	Grandmother	A	ND	Financial manager	Unaffiliated
28	18	Student	Father, Grandmother	E	7	Leader, dancer	NC
29	19	Student	Grandmother	F	3	Financial manager	Unaffiliated
30	21	Student	Both parents	H	5	ND	NC
31	19	Student	Both parents	B	4	Disser/rapper	NC
32	19	Graduate	Both parents	E	6	Dancer	NC
33	28	ND	ND	A	3	Dancer	Transport crew
34	22	ND	Grandmother	D	5	ND	NC
35	18	Student	Both parents	A	5	Logistician	Unaffiliated
36	19	Student	Both parents	G	6	Disser/rapper	Unaffiliated
37	18	Student	Grandmother	A	4	Dancer	Izikhothane
38	19	Graduate	Mother	G	6	Logistician	NC
39	21	ND	Mother	A	4	Dancer	NC

ND = Not disclosed
NC = Not contacted
[a]Crews include: 3000 Volts, Iraq 11, Legendary Money Spenders, Material Boys, Real Kings of Soweto, Steeze Addicts, Ultimate Corrector Vele, and United Legends. To protect informant identity, crews were randomly assigned labels A-H.

2018 Data Collection

In 2018, we re-interviewed 14 of our original informants to explore their current life positions, emerging adulthood, employment, education activities, and their Izikhothane journey since 2015. We developed an initial depth interview protocol and hired one of the 2015 INFUSION interviewers to recruit 14 informants (per budget constraints). Our South African co-author met with the interviewer to discuss a contact strategy, review our interview protocol, and communicate our sampling request (representation from least three crews). Using local networks, the interviewer began to recontact 2015 informants. Of the first 15 contacts, 14 informants agreed to participate in a second interview; 13 reported no longer having a formal affiliation with Izikhothane (table 2). After the interviewer conducted and transcribed two interviews, we reviewed the transcripts and made minor adjustments to the interview protocol. Our South African co-author worked with the interviewer to clarify our adjustments and to ensure needed probing. Interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes (370 transcribed single-spaced pages; 1,448 total pages across 2015 and 2018 data collections), and informants received a R250 [~$19; R13.27 = 1 USD in June 2018] shopping voucher.

Analytical Approach

We began with a broad interest in Izikhothane and subsequently focused on meaning making around social performances and destructive enactments. We engaged in a two-phased analytical approach. The first phase took an ethnographic, emic approach focused on Izikhothane informants' conversations, as well as secondary sources. We adopted a hermeneutic approach to interpret our data (Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994; Üstüner and Holt 2010), working through a series of part-to-whole iterations (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013; Spiggle 1994). After multiple independent readings of all transcripts and with a focus on tournaments of

destruction, we conducted subsequent reads to explore what motivates participation in a "destroying" social collective, to articulate the appropriation of high-end Italian brands and partaking in destructive social performances for purposes of visibility, and to examine post-performance agency of visibility and negotiated visibility. Our author team engaged in interpretive sessions to discuss and debate emerging themes drawing upon the informants' narratives (Glaser and Strauss 1967). We found consistencies around the meaning of Izikhothane, the subculture's collective identity, the preferred luxury Italian clothing and shoe brands (although specific crews preferred specific brands), the ritualized street performances, competitive rivalries, and post-performance dynamics.

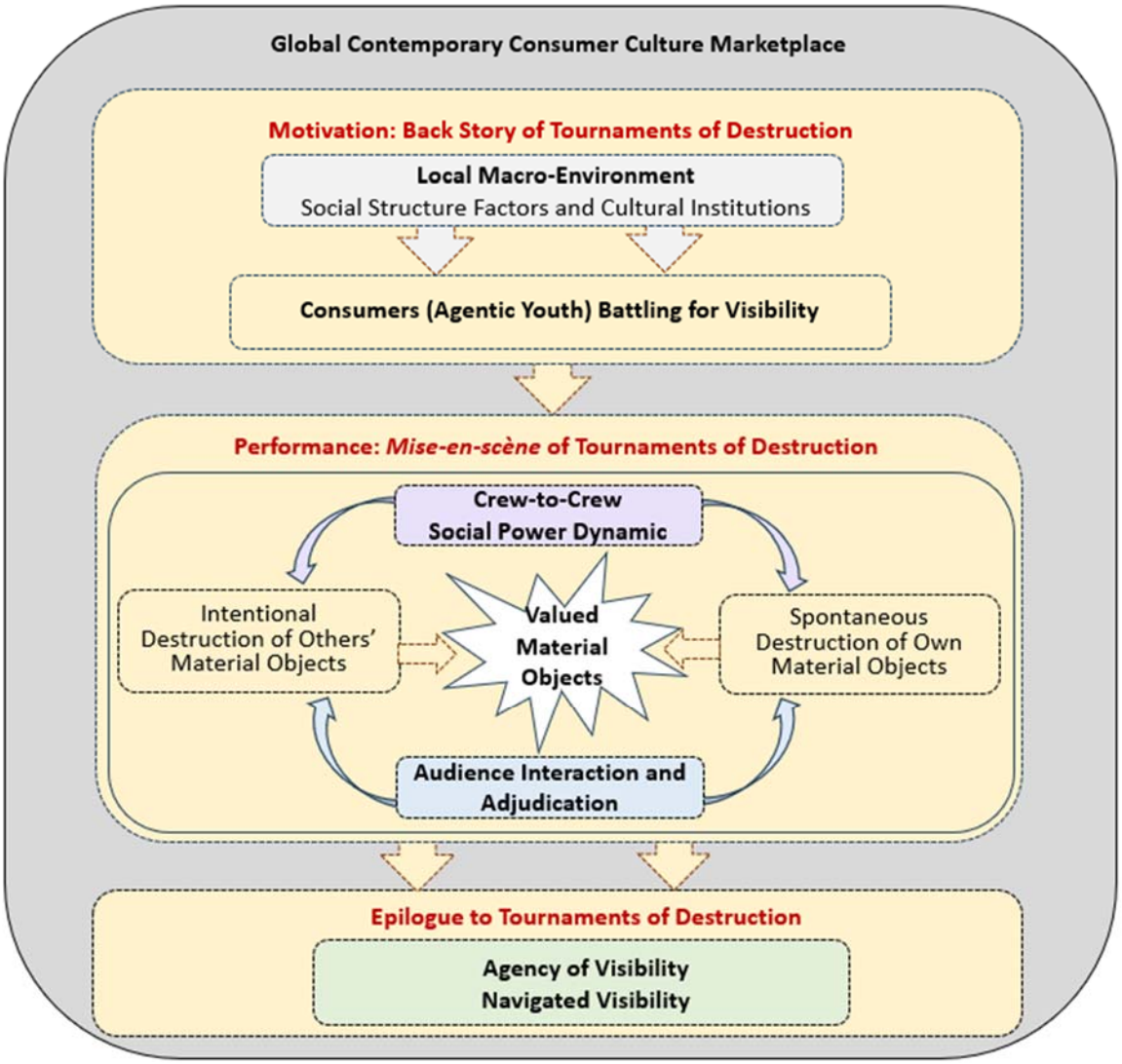
FINDINGS: IZIKHOTHANE AND TOURNAMENTS OF DESTRUCTION

Alexander's (2004) theory of social performance provides an enabling lens to explore the system of meanings and dynamics within which Izikhothane tournaments of destruction are situated. We organize our findings with attention to Alexander's intrinsically interrelated elements of a social performance: "systems of collective representation" (i.e., background symbols, foreground scripts), actors, means of symbolic production, performance observers, *mise-en-scène*, and social power. Figure 1 visually illustrates our conceptualization of Izikhothane tournaments of destruction, situated in a global contemporary consumer culture marketplace. We unfold our findings using Alexander's theoretical framework, and as figure 1 illustrates, the Izikhothane tournaments of destruction, motivated by socio-historical-cultural institutions, socio-political instability, and economic hardship, prompt certain agentic Black youth in Soweto to participate in a subculture engaged with conspicuous consumption and destruction. As these youth battle for

visibility within their local environment, this backstory gives rise to the *mise-en-scène* of their tournaments of destruction. These Izikhothane structured social performances feature crew-to-crew social power dynamics, involving competitive rivalries, entertainment, and the destruction of valued high-end Italian brands. Our findings explicate the initiation and enactment of Izikhothane tournaments of destruction, as well as audience interaction and adjudication of the battle. For Izikhothane, tournaments of destruction give agency of visibility and empowerment, yet they also bring heightened scrutiny in their hyper-local space requiring them to navigate their visibility within a shifting power dynamic.

FIGURE 1

IZIKHOTHANE TOURNAMENTS OF DESTRUCTION



Motivation to Join a Destroying Subculture: The Back Story of Tournaments of Destruction

The Local Macro-Environment. Alexander's (2004) theory of social performance identifies "systems of collective representation" as background symbols and foreground scripts that set the stage for a social performance by consumers. To provide context for Izikhothane tournaments of

destruction, we explore the local macro-environment (social structure factors and cultural institutions) to understand why some impoverished youth, as intentional, agentic decision makers, choose to participate in a social collective marked by conspicuous consumption and destruction.

Early in the 20th century, the White minority government of South Africa practiced apartheid, or informal racial segregation, and with the passage of the Urban Areas Act in 1923, the White government dictated the legal separation of races in terms of education, area of residence, and jobs. In 1930, the government forcibly removed Black residents from central Johannesburg to an area ten miles southwest of the city, creating the 31-square mile township of Soweto ("Soweto" 2022). Since its incorporation, Soweto is well known for its citizens' commitment to social justice. Today, South Africa is an established market economy impacted by Western colonialism, Christianity, and indigenous cultures (Bernstein 2002); population is 64 million comprised of approximately 80% Black, 12% mixed race, and 8% White. South Africa has 12 official languages, including Afrikaans and English.

In Soweto, 98.5% of the population is Black, and approximately 60% of households earn less than R38,200 (~$5,300) per year, including 19% who report no annual income ("Soweto" 2022). The typical family is broken, blended, and/or extended, and housing varies widely from rudimentary shacks in densely packed informal settlements to stylish homes of the middle and upper class ("Soweto" 2022). South Africa continues to be known as "a country of two nations: the rich whites and the poor blacks" (Baker 2019), shaped by significant income inequality ("Gini Coefficient by Country 2022" 2022; Goya-Tocchetto and Payne 2022). Legacies of apartheid continue to mar the lived experiences within Black communities, particularly for Black youth, with high unemployment, inadequate education, poor health care, and a lack of access to affordable housing (Baker 2019). During the time of our data collections, the unemployment rate in South

Africa was 27.7%, 46.6% among 20-24-year-old Black males, which captures most of our informants' age range (Chutel 2017).

Within South Africa and Soweto, religious and spiritual traditions are important social and cultural institutions (Bernstein 2002), as are social collectives organized by youth. With a predominance of structurally challenged Black youth and a lack of social bonding characteristic of a nuclear family, social collectives empower individuals "giving them a common self-interest and vantage point…the power of collective action and a cooperative endeavor" (Turner 2005, 13). Social collectives in Soweto take varying forms, from violent street gangs, engaging in public destruction of others' material possessions through vandalism, defacement, and damage of public and private property (Covey 2010; Franzese et al. 2016; Glaser 2000, 2018), to sports clubs and fashion-focused performative subcultures of consumption (Burnett 1999; Covey 2010; Dissel 1997; Glaser 2000; Seekings 1996).

Glaser (2000) recounts the long history of fashion-focused subcultures of consumption reflective of Western ideals and the conspicuous consumption of global brands within Soweto from the 1920s to the 21st century (see also Spinks 2014). Now, peacocking Izikhothane, Italiane, and Umswenko subcultures are enamored with Italian clothing and shoe brands (Nkosi 2011), as "South Africans want to wear what the world is wearing" (Bernstein 2002, 218). With our focus on social performances and material objects and the prevailing dominance of Christianity in South Africa, Weber (1905/2001) provides perspective on the cultural realm of values and beliefs, and the tenets of Protestantism, and capitalism. Specifically, Protestantism holds that all "things" are gifts from God and wasting or worshipping "things" is counter to the observance of God as the creator. These strong religious tenets, focused on the value of material objects and condemnation

of waste, are paramount as we explore social power dynamics between the Izikhothane and outside observers.

Consumers (Agentic Youth) Battling for Visibility. Ugor and Mawuko-Yevugah (2017) describe youth in post-colonial Africa as facing dire circumstances, "stricken by unemployment and social immobility." Indeed, Soweto and its significant social and economic inequities could be characterized as an anomic environment (Durkheim 1897/1951), where individuals are filled with "weariness, disillusionment, disappointment, and pain" (Meštrović 1987, 574). Yet, Appadurai (1996) and Bauman (2012) argue that in the age of globalization and liquid modernity, individuals are empowered to use their imagination to act and to work collectively toward a common goal. Perhaps not surprisingly then, some poor Black youth in Soweto choose to join the Izikhothane subculture of consumption and destruction.

Our informants articulate their agency as they intentionally decide to participate in Izikhothane; their goal is to be visible, that is, noticed, acknowledged, and validated on the streets of Soweto (see also Chipp et al. 2016; Mnisi 2019). They are charismatic entertainers; they have a *joie de vivre* (Wieser, Luedicke, and Hemetsberger 2021) and seek social connections (Hirschi 1969). Izikhothane identity is marked by swagger, brand affinity, and uniqueness (as illustrated by their conspicuous consumption and destruction, "Material Boys" 2019). They connect with the social and cultural performative nature of their collective (Hebdige 1979; Merton 1938; Turner 2005). ID 14 states, "Izikhothane is a fun-loving male who loves beautiful extravagant clothes. He loves to be noticed by the community, and he wants all the attention on him. You will recognize him by the brands he wears like DMD…Sfarzo, RM [Rossimoda], Arbiter, and Carvela."

Characterized by powerless anonymity and as illustrated in ID 14's quote, our informants want to be seen, "known by name, recognized by sight and talked about or written about by a nameless public unknown to them" (Brim 2009, 2; see also Adler and Adler 1989; Evans and Wilson 1999). Izikhothane narratives document their focus on conspicuous consumption of high-end Italian brands and their fashion prowess. They discuss how their "bricoleured" clothing and showiness, rap, and dance, attract attention within their local community. Interestingly, our informants explicitly state their "desire to be famous" and their follow-up comments substantiate that this desire is closely aligned with having locals' eyes on them. Their desire is more appropriately referred to as "street fame," rather than the broad-based renown associated with "celebrity fame." ID 13 substantiates the Izikhothane interpretation of being famous as being visible and validated within their local community:

> "We wanted to be famous; we wanted to be popular among girls. Izikhothane like followers, and we are nothing without the fans. We wanted to be famous for the good things that we are doing, besides being [Izikhothane], tearing clothes. Fashion was our number one priority. We wanted to look good always and we loved looking good."

In making their choice to participate in the Izikhothane subculture of consumption and destruction, our informants both "reject ordinary" and "reject violence." Regarding the former, these Black male youth want to distance themselves from the local poverty and set themselves apart from every day "ordinariness" associated with school and youth sports. Izikhothane are creative in rejecting the ordinary, by reimaging long-standing cultural institutions of performative Black African male subcultures in and around Johannesburg who, for decades prior, wore high-end brands and engaged in performative activities (Glaser 2000). They embrace their history, "You know, when we are dressed up, we walk like the uncles [*leaders in the local neighborhood, not*

necessarily blood relatives], the real leaders. We do the Italian walk like our elders" [ID 16]. Izikhothane extend the street performances of prior generations to competitive rivalries with intentional and spontaneous destruction of high-end brands.

In rejecting violence, these Black youth choose the "protection" of Izikhothane and reject participating in subcultures or street gangs where guns, robbery, and rape are the norm (Covey 2010; Glaser 2000; Ward, van der Merwe, and Dawes 2013). They realize that "life-threatening conditions exist around every street corner and in every teenage hangout" (Bernstein 2002, 203). ID 1 shares that the street is "where bad influence starts. First, it's knives, then you start mugging people, then it's smoking, next it's drugs." ID 37 explains:

> When you are in the township idling, not knowing what to do, it is easy to find yourself doing mischief, whereas when you are [Izikhothane], you always have something exciting to do…[otherwise] the only thing in your mind is criminal activities, so you can get the money and end up in jail.

Taken together, rather than being ordinary or being violent, Izikhothane seek to be to be visible; they leverage their conspicuous consumption and destruction of high-end Italian fashion brands to be seen, acknowledged, and validated in their impoverished surroundings (Chipp et al. 2016; Veblen 1899/1994).

The Social Performance*: Mise-en-scène* of Tournaments of Destruction

Alexander's (2004) theory of social performance provides for examining the *mise-en-scène* of tournaments of destruction. We focus on the centrality of valued material objects and the initiation, enactment, and adjudication of the tournaments of destruction with attention to the crew-

to-crew power dynamic and the entertaining competitive rivalry as adjudicated by those gathered to take in the battle.

The Centrality of Valued Material Objects. Material objects are central to Alexander's (2004, 532) theory of social performance, as objects "serve as iconic representations" enabling actors to dramatize and make visible "invisible motives and morals they are trying to represent." Within market societies and global consumer culture, brands are the "preeminent site through which people experience and express the social world" (Holt 2002, 83; see also Fournier and Alvarez 2019; Price and Coulter 2019) and part of global and "glocal" cultural and social identity and aspirations (Askegaard 2006; Belk 1999; Fournier 1998; Cayla and Eckhardt 2008; Strizhakova, Coulter, and Price 2008, 2012). Cayla and Arnould (2008, 105) give context to brands being "woven into the fabric of global consumer culture" (see also Gürhan-Canli, Sarial-Abi, and Hayran 2018) such that brands serve as important symbols in everyday life experiences, with inherent values for meaning-making (Appadurai 1986; Graeber 2001; Spillman 2020).

Izikhothane devotion to Italian apparel brands, cannot be understated. As Bernstein (2002, 196) notes, most South African consumers are eager to adopt new Western products, fashions, music, and ideas, and that Italian fashion brands are of particular interest because of their global renown. Former South African President Mbeki, in his Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture (2006), remarked, "The meaning of freedom has come to be defined, not by the seemingly ethereal and therefore intangible gift of liberty, but by the designer labels on the clothes we wear…[coupled with] a lifestyle of conspicuous consumption" (Posel 2010, 159). As do other consumers around the world, Izikhothane appropriate brands and imbue their own meanings. For Izikhothane, "cool" Italian high-end brands include Arbiter, Carvela, Muracchini [DMD], Rossimoda [RM], and

Sfarzo (see figure 2 for visual examples; Belk, Tian, and Paavola 2010; Warren et al. 2019). These brands provide economic, glocal symbolic, as well as hedonic and aesthetic meanings integral to Izikhothane consumption and destruction practices (Askegaard 2006; Strizhakova, Coulter, and Price 2012); we discuss each in turn.

FIGURE 2

PHOTOGRAPHIC ILLUSTRATIONS OF IZIKHOTHANE
PREFERRED CLOTHING AND SHOE BRANDS

First, Izikhothane consume high-end apparel brands because they exude economic value, particularly because of their high costs and their signaling power to others that these low-income, low-power consumers can afford the brands, consistent with practices of conspicuous consumption documented in consumer research (Sundie et al. 2011; Wang and Griskevicius 2014). ID 39 explains, “With the Izikhothane, life is not all about clothes for their own sake, but it is all about

how much they cost…[they] are very expensive, I have Arbiter, [Rossimoda]… I have spent [~475 USD] on my shoes." Ownership and conspicuous display of these high-end Italian brands are signals that Izikhothane have the financial wherewithal (in the moment) to purchase expensive clothing and shoe brands. Inggs and Kemp (2016) reinforce the signaling power of Izikhothane conspicuous consumption, "The possessions, the passions, the fashion, and the actions revolved around one all-encompassing creed: 'Look at me; I can afford this.'" Yet, with a more complete understanding of their life stories, Izikhothane, like the Bluffeurs of Côte d'Ivoire, appear "as wealthy, successful, and symbolically modern, and yet [are] poor and powerless in the face of numerous symbolic and economic obligations" (Newell 2012, 141–2).

Second, Izikhothane acquire Italian brands, imbued with "glocalized" symbolic meanings, grounded within the historical, economic, social, and cultural context (Belk 1999; Coulter, Price, and Feick 2003; Crockett 2017; Holt 2002; Thompson and Haytko 1997). Bernstein (2002, 196) recognizes the creolization of these fashion brands within the township culture as consumers are "borrowing here, incorporating there, retaining this, rejecting that." Appropriated brands express the subculture's identity with an indigenous flare and reflect globalization and wealth. ID 1 reflects on the cultural prominence of brands:

> …brands like DMD [Muracchini] Sfarzo, Arbiter, RM [Rossimoda]. Those brands are specifically worn by Izikhothane…but these are old brands that we grew up seeing our uncles and fathers wearing. What we did was to bring them back and give them the freshness.

Izikhothane consume these brands to be visible, as ID 16 articulates, "[The brands I wear (e.g., Arbiter, Sfarzo, and DMD)] give me some 'oomph'…When I pass, people must be able to say something."

Third, Izikhothane are engaged with *joie de vivre* and fashion-forwardness, and their collective identity is tied to their consumption of Italian high-end apparel brands for their hedonic and aesthetic meanings. Izikhothane act as bricoleurs who appropriate the meanings of established Italian luxury brands in their own artful, aesthetically engaging, and whimsical ensembles; unexpected color combinations reinforce their personal uniqueness on the streets of Soweto. ID 23 explains how Izikhothane brands take on hedonic and aesthetic value distinguishing members of the subculture:

> [Izikhothane] love putting on color-blocking clothes, like a pink Carvela [shoes] and orange trousers – those that like bright clothes, those are Izikhothane. Some, who are more like us, wear Sfarzo shirts like mine, and they put on Arbiter shoes. So, those are all Izikhothane.

Similarly, ID 14 distinguishes Izikhothane by "beautiful extravagant clothes…The clothes that you rarely see on ordinary people, [Izikhothane] always dress out of line with lots of contrasting colors and clothes that an ordinary person would wear maybe only weekends." Thus, Izikhothane acquire and appropriate brands that uniquely imbue aesthetic value; they are playful and whimsical in creating Italian-branded, "bricoleured" outfits.

Initiation, Enactment, and Adjudication of Tournaments of Destruction. For Alexander (2004), the *mise-en-scène*, might be compared to Goffman's front stage (1959), where the interplay of the actors and material objects come together before the audience. With Izikhothane consuming high-end Italian brands as means of symbolic production, this section focuses on the *mise-en-scène*, the initiation, enactment, and adjudication of the battle or the signature boundary-marking event of tournaments of destruction (Alexander 2004; Goffman 1961; Spillman 2020). With the

"battlefield" established, with crews in place and the focused gathering of "a set of persons engrossed in a common flow of activity and relating to one another in terms of that flow" (Goffman 1961, 9–10) as the audience, the Izikhothane tournament of destruction begins.

The initiation of a tournament of destruction is a staged and ritualized entertaining, competitive rivalry. At the onset, one crew's disser begins rapping using culturally informed and spoken Izikhothane-Italian language, which incorporates rhythmic speech and street vernacular, and often ridicules the rival and references favored brands. During dissers' enactments, they dance toward one another peacocking and rapping:

> My name is [ID 20], the womanizer, the specializer, the vomanizer, those that wear fonkinizer…They call me Michael Jordan because I was the first man to jump and touch the sky. When I fell down in the Crocodile River, I was beaten by a crocodile named Lacoste in the pool. I started walking like a man who can't walk, Johnnie Walker on top of the red carpet, drinking Hennessy, wearing a red Rossimoda.

As the Izikhothane battle proceeds, the *mise-en-scène* evolves with the interplay of the crew members, audience, and the destruction of high-end Italian brands. ID 31 remarks:

> The battle is all about competing and showing that we can afford more and better than others. We felt it's not enough to show our affordability through clothes only. We ended up buying grocery items like rice, bleach, [and] cooking oil, and mixed a lot of things, including Ultra Mel custard together, just to mess up the opponents' outfits.

The destroyers engage in the intentional ritualistic destruction where they "decorate" their opponent's luxury clothing and shoe brands by throwing alcohol (e.g., Johnnie Walker scotch), liquid custard (Ultra Mel), and/or bleach (Jik). ID 36 provides context, commenting, "it's entirely

up to [the destroyer] what he destroys." Enactment of tournaments of destruction revolves around high-end brands and crew-to-crew social power dynamics with each destroyer taking on the role of power-broker for their crew. The agency of performance in tournaments of destruction is similar to consumers participating in (non-destructive) self-expressive, entertaining social performances, such as women roller derby skaters (Thompson and Üstüner 2015) and skydivers (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993).

Arguably, Izikhothane tournaments of destruction may have been initiated and enacted in defiance of their low-income and low-power designation, purposefully drawing attention to themselves as destroyers within their hyper-local community. Indeed, news reports speculate that destructive practices are an "act against politicians…and against Western products that symbolize White society" (Capron 2013); Johannesburg clinical psychologist Sinkoyi states, "It's tempting to think of Izikhothane as some kind of nihilistic reaction to a rampantly consumerist culture, a negation of the power that 'stuff' has over us" ("Burning Bling" 2012). Yet, Bernstein (2002, 158) recalls that "South Africa has long-standing, close connections with Western countries and has long been subject to globalizing forces emanating from Britain, the United States, and elsewhere," and that Black South Africans particularly benefitted from Western opposition to apartheid. Thus, she argues that Black South Africans embrace Western, globalizing forces. Moreover, our informants, as consumers and destroyers of high-end Italian brands, do not articulate politicization or nihilism driving their destruction. Rather, they articulate that these valued brands with their myriad economic, symbolic, hedonic, aesthetic, cultural, and social meanings are central to their battle for visibility in their local environment. ID 18 shares the battle conversation that culminated in his destructive enactments, with a clear recollection of the price paid for the high-end Italian brands:

> It started with a verbal battle. He said I am nothing, what do I have? I told him I have Carvela shoes and Arbiter. He said I should stop talking and burn them. So, I burnt them…I burnt my Sfarzo pants that cost me R3500 [$190], my R400 [$22] t-shirt and a Carvela shoe…I had another layer of clothes underneath and I carried an extra pair of shoes…I became very famous all over as the boy that burned clothes.

Similarly, ID 2 recalls having burned a pair of Sfarzo trousers "which cost R1500 [$82]… I loved those trousers, but I had to do it for status." ID 17 also recounts having bought expensive clothes to "tear them apart. I just wanted to show off…When you do that you attract followers…people respect you because you have fame and money."

As the battle progresses, the audience legitimizes and valorizes the destruction of high-end brands. There is a fusion between the crew members and the audience as they buy into the rivalries and the bluff; they fuel the destructive enactments as they cheer on the crew members. "The adrenalin was pumping because the crowd cheered me on. It was exciting. There is nothing as exciting as hearing your fans cheering you on. At that point, you can do anything; you are on top of the world" [ID 1]. The "destroyers" pay close attention to which crew has the advantage based on the audience's reaction, and they must determine whether continuing to destroy an opponent's attire is sufficient to win the battle or if destruction of one's *own* clothing is required to emphasize crew superiority. ID 1 affirms tournaments of destruction power dynamics, by elevating oneself through the denigration of others, noting, "That's where we showcased how powerful we are…you have to bring them down. That's the whole point. It's to prove to the opponent that you are mightier than them…"

In some battles, a particular crew has destroyed the others' clothing, "flattened" the competition, and clearly is the victor. At other times, battles are "close" and being the victor requires destroyers with intentionality, in the moment, to destroy their own high-end Italian brands. In extreme cases, Izikhothane destruction can include the illegal burning or tearing of South African currency, "They can decide to splash alcohol on us and say [that] we do not have money. In this instance, one of us will take out money and burn it to prove a point" [ID 11]. Collective effervescence characterizes these competitive rivalries as they experience "shared emotions and the ensuing reciprocal emotional activation" in a "considerably amplified emotional state" (Durkheim 1912/1995; Rimé and Páez 2023, 16). Ultimately, the audience adjudicates the tournament's outcome, collectively identifying the winner. ID 4 notes, "It's all up to the fans who wins. We are just entertainers trying to make our way in this journey."

The Izikhothane tournament of destruction involves the destruction of valued material objects as low-income, low power Black youth battle for visibility amidst powerless anonymity (Bandura 1999; Mnisi 2015; Sidanius and Pratto 2001). Yet, the Izikhothane claim that they can continuously replace their high-end Italian brands is part of a bluff (Newell 2012) where they live in the moment of an illusory life of wealth and audience members embrace the bluff with shared complicity.

Epilogue to Tournaments of Destruction

In the aftermath of tournaments of destruction, Izikhothane visibility is agentic, but also must be negotiated in the context of varied influential "others" and their perspectives on destruction. As such, we extend Alexander's theory of social performance (2004) to address the

social power dynamics between consumers and others that occur because of Izikhothane conspicuous display of high-end brands and tournaments of destruction.

Agency of Visibility. Izikhothane visibility, in the face of conspicuous consumption and tournaments of destruction, brings adulation that upends ordinariness on the Soweto streets. Locals "go mad;" "you would hear some whistles, people blowing some whistles, cheering us on…Some would cheer us when we pass and show some encouragement or respect or even say, 'Here are the top Izikhothane, the top dogs'" [ID 33]. The exuberant praise of locals brings visibility to Izikhothane, validation and acknowledgement in their hyper-local space, "When I walk down the street, everyone is impressed by my looks, from the youngest to the oldest of both sexes…I know for a fact that if I can step out of this yard now, before I get to the end of the street, someone will recognize me and scream my name" [ID 12]. Being seen and known by name matters. ID 25 echoes the importance of renown in the local neighborhood, "All over Soweto, people know [me and my Izikhothane crew]…if you can ask anyone about [my crew], people will tell you who we are..." These exchanges give Izikhothane visibility but also social power, and they revel in this hero-worship (Adler and Adler 1989, 301). Being visible to people who they may not know is a characteristic identified by scholars who study well-identified personalities (Brim 2009; Greenwood, Long, and Cin 2013).

Izikhothane visibility in the local community breeds self-confidence and heightened feelings of empowerment, masculinity, and invincibility (Brim 2009; Giles 2000; Singer 2019). With this social power dynamic in their favor, Izikhothane are emboldened and exert their power through objectification of young women from the audience, and more generally over local male youth. Tournament victors engage in peacocking and misogynistic behavior and are viewed as

"powerful" [ID 17] by young women attending the battle. Despite having established girlfriends, Izikhothane talk about accumulating girls for sex (Chipp et al. 2016). "[These women] are not really our girlfriends. We call them 'snacks,' because you just spend the night together…We will never go to them again; it's the last night's history" [ID 26]. This masculine hegemony among Izikhothane (Singer 2019) is similar to that documented about males around the world (Griskevicius et al. 2007; Hebdige 1979; Newell 2012; Tamagni 2015; Williams 2011). Thus, our work shares conceptual space with the social structuring of heroic masculinity in consumption practices, where men convince themselves that their consumption and success is vital (Holt and Thompson 2004). Additionally, Izikhothane call their peers "idiots" [ID 18] and look "down on [other young males] that do not have what he has" [ID 33]. ID 12 remarks, "He doesn't have a voice and he is basically nothing. It's the nature of the trend; people are judged by what they wear. And that makes me feel like I own the world. I feel like I am visible, I feel special…He is a normal person." Thus, like dissing in battles, Izikhothane verbally "flatten" others in their hyper-local space. They wield their newfound visibility and seek to increase the power disparity between themselves and other male youth.

To further appreciate their agentic visibility, low-income, low-power Izikhothane consumption and tournaments of destruction involving high-end Italian brands might be viewed through Braudy's (1986) work on fame. A desire for recognition and appreciation is interwoven with the nature of the human community, acknowledging that being known on the streets promises visibility and a "liberation from powerless anonymity" (Braudy 1986, 7). Particularly relevant to these low-income, low-power consumers, Braudy (1986, 584) argues that fame is a "causal nexus through which more generalized forces–political, theological, artistic, economic, sociological–

flow to mediate the shape of our individual lives…Thus the urge for fame mingles one's acceptance of oneself with the desires for others to recognize that one is special."

Izikhothane gain visibility as well as social power and personal agency through tournaments of destruction. Yet, considered over time, their visibility is best described as "fleeting" – here today and gone tomorrow. Our 2018 interviews reveal that all had moved beyond their "live in the moment" young adulthood (Hebdige 1979; Williams 2011) and had expressed a sense of loss over what was once their renown on the streets of Soweto. Their street fame was time-bound, marked by a liminal period of "waithood" where they were in a state of limbo in-between childhood and adulthood (Singer 2019).

Negotiated Visibility. Izikhothane tournaments of destruction bring adverse "outsider" attention to the subculture and its members from family and members of society. These negative "outsider" appraisals of Izikhothane are grounded in extravagant consumption and destruction practices within an economy of scarcity, societal priorities viewed through the Protestant Ethic (Weber 1905/2001; Yates and Hunter 2011), and societal beliefs shaped by the South African philosophy of Ubuntu (Zulu word for common humanity, Mathabane 2018). Taken together, these perspectives stress connectedness and generosity versus individualistic desires (Bernstein 2002; Mathabane 2018). Thus, within the larger social system, we observe a negotiated visibility and shifting social power dynamic between Izikhothane and "outsiders" who have a critical eye on their practices (Fiske and Berndahl 2007; Molm 1990).

Post-apartheid, many Black parents and adult extended family members want to and are expected to provide financial support to youth to help them experience a better, more equitable life (Wende 2013). Hence, many Izikhothane parents and adult relatives financially support the

purchase of high-end Italian apparel brands. Realizing the disdain for Izikhothane tournaments of destruction, members hide their stained or ruined clothing and shoes to protect their financial backing. ID 16 remarks, “My mom knew, she would hear from people and confront me, and I would tell her it’s just a game. My uncle has no clue. I knew if he were to know, then I would not get [an allowance] from him.” ID 20’s parents label Izikhothane “a Satanist act” because of the ritualized burning and ripping of clothes and destroying money, and ID 36 reports his parents being “livid when they saw [my expensive t-shirt] with burn marks.” Interestingly, some Izikhothane report that family members rationalized family financial backing because participation in this destructive social collective is less dangerous than affiliation with violent gangs or drug use.

Society at large and media also condemn Izikhothane tournaments of destruction (Inggs and Kemp 2016; Wende 2013). Despite potentially enjoying the entertainment value, local Blacks of all ages scrutinize the conspicuous consumption and destruction of high-end apparel. In the Material Boys video (2014), older local residents, reflecting on their own experiences during apartheid, question Izikhothane destructive practices, “I honestly don’t feel good about Izikhothane because it’s a drastic change from how we grew up. Times have changed. We are free now and there is no oppressor.” Wende (2013) reports on an older Black resident who participated in the 1976 uprising in Soweto as a teenager, dismayed about excessive consumption, commenting “This isn’t what we struggled for.” Moreover, some younger Black males outright reject Izikhothane wastefulness; Mzwandile (age 17) laments, “It’s disturbing,” and Bafana (also 17) says, “They’re just wasting their parents’ money. What I’d like them to do is put their expensive clothes in a box and donate it to charity, and not burn them” (“Burning Bling” 2012). Thus, Izikhothane must navigate the costs and benefits of visibility afforded by their participation in tournaments of destruction.

EMERGENT THEMES OF DESTRUCTIVE SOCIAL PERFORMANCES

Our primary research on the Izikhothane and the destructive performances by other social collectives provide grounding for four emergent themes, including spatiotemporal visibility, the intentionality of destruction, focused gatherings and collective effervescence, and sociomoral condemnation. In this section, we examine how each emergent theme is situated within Alexander's (2004) theory of social performance and how each is enacted (or not) in tournaments of destruction engaged by Izikhothane, pre-market society collectives, and by other social collectives in contemporary consumer culture engaged in destructive enactments.

Spatiotemporal Visibility

Visibility, being seen, known, and acknowledged, is a key motivating force for Izikhothane tournaments of destruction, but this visibility is spaciotemporal in nature; that is, confined to a specific time and place. Izikhothane are consumers in an economy of scarcity and come from a place of invisibility; they are not seen in their hyper-local settings and do not have excess wealth. Their local macro-environment with structural factors and cultural institutions set the stage and give life to the subculture centered on social performances of conspicuous consumption and destruction. For some living in such an "upside down" anomic social reality (Durkheim 1897/1951), they become disillusioned and disconnected from society (Franzese et al. 2016; Meštrović 1987). Yet many young adults, like Izikhothane, gravitate to social collectives, and use social performances to find ways to express themselves and to be seen and validated within their hyper-local space. They hustle for the financial wherewithal to purchase their beloved, cool high-

end Italian fashion brands, and yet their wealth in the form of these brands is best described as a bluff.

Combatting invisibility through compensatory consumption, conspicuous consumption and display of high-end brands is a well-documented practice around the world (Rucker, Dubois, and Galinsky 2011; Rucker and Galinsky 2008). Bauman 2017 (x) provides some perspective that Izikhothane are empowered and their consumption and street performances temporarily counter the "life of perpetual humiliation" endured by the poor, explaining why " 'the poor' cherish the brands they can get their hands on by fair means or foul – to be 'normal' for a moment." More perplexing is how the Izikhothane destruction of high-end brands is normalized and ritualized in their social performances. Yet, as Bauman alludes, the "in the moment" visibility of the being seen, being validated, and being acknowledged resonates with Izikhothane tournaments of destruction, justifying the fleeting nature of visibility. Thus, visibility may be viewed within Alexander's (2004) theory as social power, but with limited time and scope.

Our longitudinal perspective, drawing from initial interviews and then interviews three years later, further establishes the fleeting nature of visibility. In the 2018 interviews, Izikhothane reflect on their days of visibility, when they were known on the streets of Soweto. During that three-year period, their agentic and social power benefits from their days of visibility all but vanished.

In contrast to the visibility sought by the invisible Izikhothane and their tournaments of destruction in contemporary consumer culture, affluent tribal chiefs and cock owners operating within an economy of excess in pre-market societies appear to have a different goal with tournaments of destruction; their goal is the reproduction of rank within their hierarchically networked pre-market societies. Moreover, destructive performances by affluent social collectives

in contemporary society, such as the Brats and Burners, similarly seek to address acknowledgement (Kozinets 2002; Östberg 2011). These social collectives, with individuals of affluence, participating in conspicuous destruction enactments are not coming from a place of invisibility, rather they are leveraging their wealth to reify and bolster their visibility within their collectives and observing audiences.

Additionally, and counter to past consumer research on low-income, low-power consumers seeking to attain socioeconomic mobility (e.g., Chytkova and Kjeldgaard 2024; Üstüner and Thompson 2012), our research provides a different perspective for consumers in economies of scarcity; one that reveals spaciotemporal visibility "in the moment" within a hyper-local space. Izikhothane embrace their victories, yet these visibility benefits are best described as temporary. Visibility is not sustainable long-term, because participation in these tournaments of destruction is grounded in the bluff that Izikhothane have unlimited financial resources, which they do not. Thus, our findings resonate with work on spatiotemporal experiences in consumer research literature, where temporary escape is fleeting, even if the experience offers a momentary suspension of reality and the effervescent excitement of ritual, community, sociality, and solidarity (Goulding et al. 2009; Kozinets 2002; Thornton 1996). Finally, extraordinary consumption experiences with potential communal benefits, such as with destructive social collectives, may conclude in self-interested pursuits and loneliness, as romanticized portraits of comradery in consumption experiences can sometimes fail to materialize (Tumbat and Belk 2011).

The Intentionality of Destruction

Tournaments of destruction are social performances marked by the intentionality of destroying valued meaningful objects, which adapts Alexander's (2004) theory of social performances in a novel way. We further reveal that sometimes those valued objects belong to the destroyer, and sometimes, they are the property of others (Graeber 2001). Within contemporary consumer culture, Izikhothane tournaments of destruction are organized around the important signaling qualities of high-end Italian apparel brands – their economic, glocal, and hedonic meanings (Alexander 2004; Goffman 1959), and the counterintuitive conspicuous destruction of these expensive and meaningful brands by low-income, low-power consumers. To our knowledge, Izikhothane is the only subculture that destroys both others' and their own valued material goods with intentionality, although the destruction of their own branded fashion apparel is spontaneous and enacted to incur heightened audience reaction during social performances. Izikhothane brands hold deep historic, contextual, and symbolic meanings, making their intentional destruction surprising and counterintuitive. During our data collection and fieldwork, informants wanted to show off their valued (albeit limited) material possessions. They asked interviewers to take photos of their special branded items, often displaying them in original packaging, yet set against backdrops of their impoverished circumstances. Nonetheless, the allure of tournaments of destruction led these same consumers to decisively subject those possessions to destruction.

Similarly, during "blood sport" social performances, with the exemplar of cockfights, Geertz (1973) documents the extent to which cock owners care for their birds, engaging in pruning and hygienic care and showing affection, only to subject these possessions to the brutalities of the fight. However, for the most part, intentional destruction of valued material objects by social

collectives in pre-market societies occurs without remorse. In potlatch ceremonies, for example, the focus is on goods (e.g., furs, canoes, and coppers) with economic value, as the Kwakiutl and their pre-market tribal counterparts lived in contexts of resource abundance. Accounts of potlatch ceremonies suggest little emotional or symbolic attachment to these materials objects (Ridsdale 1997), consistent with many social performances where brands and material objects are less valorized (Alexander 2004). These insights on intentional destruction of goods that have value contribute broadly to the disposition literature, which primarily has examined the disposition of material goods where the value is depleted (e.g., Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005).

Intentionality of destruction is evident in the competitive rivalries in tournaments of destruction and other destructive social performances whether they are concurrent or sequential. Izikhothane battles and Balinese cockfights involve competing directly with the opponent in their tournaments of destruction, where the outcome is adjudicated immediately during the performance (akin to sports teams competing against one another; Hill, Canniford, and Eckhardt 2022). Potlatch competitive rivalries are sequential, however, and their outcomes are adjudicated over time and across subsequent ceremonies where visibility and social rank are continually negotiated (Ridsdale 1997). In destructive enactments by the Brats and Burners, there are not subgroup or crew competitions. Street gangs, however, engage in destructive enactments during competitive rivalries, often known as "turf wars," for control over a particular geo-local space. Their outcomes may be judged by the intentional infliction of harm on the warring opponent, and violent conflicts may endure over years (Glaser 2018). However, these destructive enactments involve intentionally destroying others' property, further evidencing the unique nature of Izikhothane tournaments of destruction in contemporary consumer culture, where others' possessions, as well as their own material goods, are destroyed.

Focused Gatherings and Collective Effervescence

Audiences are key to social performances (Alexander 2004), and focused gatherings (a set of persons engrossed in a common flow of activity and relating to one another in terms of that flow, Goffman 1961, 9–10) are integral to tournaments of destruction. We distinctly observe focused gatherings for potlatch ceremonies of tribal communities, blood sports, and Izikhothane battles, where the audience is integral to the activity and energy of the destructive enactments. Our findings document exuberant and emotional exchanges during tournaments of destruction and extend recent work about collective effervescence within social atmospheres in the context of Mardi Gras (Weinberger and Wallendorf 2012) and English Premier League (EPL) football (Hill et al. 2022). For Izikhothane, the focused gathering commands the unique and critical role of audience as adjudicator of the tournament of destruction; their cheers, in the wake of a collective effervescence, declare the winning crew as the victor in the social performance.

As Izikhothane tournaments of destruction unfold, performers in the battle are keenly aware of the audience reaction and adjust their need to intensify their destructive behavior accordingly. As we have documented, Izikhothane bear significant costs as audience reactions intensify, performing ever more outrageous destructive enactments of their own material objects to win approval. As adjudicators of the social performance, Izikhothane audiences wield considerable power and authority over the tournament outcomes.

In potlatch ceremonies, the audience bears witness to hierarchical substantiation by tribal chiefs but has no authority to affect ceremonial outcomes (Ridsdale 1997). Similarly, in blood sports where audiences engage in deep play (Geertz 1973), members irrationally wager on cock fight outcomes, but have no input in determining which cock triumphs. In considering destructive

enactments and social performances by other contemporary social collectives, we note that audiences of Brat activities, for example, do not qualify as a focused gathering as their presence is circumstantial; they are at the right place to *observe*, rather than participate in, destructive enactments. In other "non-destructive" social performances, audiences are often focused gatherings with engaged participations in consumer enactments in specific consumption communities (e.g., Belk and Costa 1998; Seregina and Weijo 2017) or via extraordinary experiences (e.g., Orazi and van Laer 2023; Tumbat and Belk 2011).

Our work on tournaments of destruction extends consumer research focused on collective experiences, where communal interactions produce shared emotions and are understood as interaction ritual chains (Collins 2004). Interaction rituals are created by an assemblage of people, focused on the same thing, and experienced through shared emotion. These interaction rituals may culminate in collective effervescence, where the participants' mood together is stronger than if they were separate, as its own unique force (Rimé and Páez 2023). Our work complements consumer research investigating interaction rituals and collective effervescence in the context of the violent actions of English Premier League football fans (Hill et al. 2022) and Burning Man activities (Kozinets 2002). Our findings, focused on tournaments of destruction embraced and valorized by low-income, low-power collectives, provide support for Durkheim's (1912/1995) predictions about violence and chaos that may ensue following effervescent experiences. Specifically, as Izikhothane seek visibility in their hyper-local environments before a focused gathering, and as these dynamics spontaneously unfold, the audience is fueled by collective effervescence exacerbates and valorizes destruction.

Sociomoral Condemnation of Destruction

Sociomoral condemnation of destructive enactments, including tournaments of destruction, is pervasive, as social power shifts from the destroyers of valued material objects to the observers of destruction (Alexander 2004). Broadly speaking, research documenting conspicuous destruction suggests reactions hinge on the destroyer's financial wherewithal. When those with few financial resources engage in excessive spending that compromises minimal living needs, their actions are questioned and often met with outrage (Rucker et al. 2011). Yet, other work indicates that destruction by social collectives leads to morally outraged "outsiders," regardless of whether the destroyer has significant financial resources (e.g., Burners, Brats, Kwakiutl; Boas 1920, 1924; Codere 1950; Kozinets 2002, Östberg 2011) or has minimal financial resources (e.g., graffiti crews, street gangs; Bloch 2019; Covey 2010; Franzese et al. 2016). Indeed, theories of value which hold that consumers engage with an object until it no longer possesses or offers any value (Graeber 2001) are informed by cultural institutions consistent with a Western, Protestant ethic, where destruction is scrutinized, vilified, and demonized as wasteful.

With Izikhothane, "outsiders" discuss the consumption and destruction of valued objects, particularly as objects that have economic value, as an abrogation of the moral conscience of society. With the vast majority of South Africans professing to be Christian, grounded by the Protestant Ethic, value is attached to material goods, thrift, and efficiency, and to the avoidance of impulsive enjoyment. Izikhothane conspicuous consumption and destruction of expensive brands signaling wealth impugns the tenets of Christianity and the Puritan Ethic. Additionally, the Izikhothane culture of exuberance, spectacle, and bluffing, in the face of financial adversity, conflicts with the Puritan Ethic of avoiding indulgence, and the South African philosophy of

Ubuntu. Ultimately, the moral outrage (3rd Degree News Program 2012; Capron 2013) and outsiders appropriating more social power served to curtail Izikhothane tournaments of destruction in favor of dance and rap competitions.

Similarly, the potlatch ceremonies, tournaments of destruction by indigenous tribes of the Pacific Northwest, were heavily scrutinized by arriving Europeans and Christian missionaries. They argued that the distribution of gifts and sacrifice of material goods associated with potlatch ceremonies was wasteful and degrading. Consequently, the Canadian government outlawed potlatch practices from 1884 through 1951 (Cole and Chaikin 1990). Moreover, Geertz (1973) deemed the deep play associated with the illegal Balinese cockfights, though popular entertainment forums, as irrational. Even the destructive behaviors (not characterized as tournaments of destruction) by wealthy Stockholm Brats and Burners were disparaged by outsiders and by media coverage (Borneskog 2011; "What Happens at Burning Man: The Good and the Bad" 2022). Thus, destructive enactments by social collectives in economies of excess and scarcity and across contemporary and pre-market societies are maligned and disparaged.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research was propelled by our observation of low-income, low-power Izikhothane subculture members paradoxically engaging in conspicuous consumption and destruction of high-end Italian apparel brands. We undertook a phenomenological case study of Izikhothane, as well as an investigation of destructive enactments by other social collectives in pre-market and contemporary societies. These insights informed our conceptualization of the tournament of destruction as a staged and ritualized social performance involving entertainment and competitive rivalry in which consumers destroy valued material objects before a focused gathering. Broadly

speaking, our work contributes by situating tournaments of destruction within the more encompassing domain of social performances in consumer research (Arnould and Price 2000; Deighton 1992) and reveals how destructive enactments might be understood through the lens of Alexander's (2004) theory of social performances. We conclude by articulating how our work provides both contributions and future research opportunities for consumer research.

First, by drawing upon Alexander's theory of social performance (2004), we articulated the Izikhothane tournaments of destruction within a system of meanings, focused on valued material objects, competitive rivalry, destruction and entertainment, and an audience. Thus, our work contributes to the conversation about destruction by situating the intentional and counter-intuitive destruction of valued material objects by impoverished youth within a broader socio-cultural-historical context, including social structure (Durkheim 1895/1982; Merton 1938), social bonding (Hirschi 1969), globalization (Ugor and Mawuko-Yevugah 2017), and cultural institutions (Glaser 2000). In drawing attention to motivations for participating in a "destroying" subculture, we provide insights on how the social conditions and cultural institutions of the macroenvironment lead to a quest for visibility within one's hyper-local space. Future research might take a macro-level quantitative approach to specifically contrast how factors such as social structure, social bonding, and market development impact individual and social collective destructive actions toward brands, or a micro-approach to examine how psychological traits play into choice of destructive social collective participation.

Second, our work illuminates the surprising contrast between treasuring one's possessions and then willingly destroying those possessions before an audience as consumers battle for visibility. In our work, the high-end brands held economic, social, glocal, hedonic, and aesthetic meanings for low-income, low-power consumers. Additional investigation of brand and product

destruction with attention to various combinations of meanings could provide perspectives about product or brand journeys versus product or brand destruction. Additional research could more formally investigate how global brands choose to affiliate with specific subcultures within other countries to leverage or change their domestic brand meanings to be more localized. Our research highlights social collectives and the role of an influential audience in collective effervescence within tournaments of destruction. Future work might seek to understand the consumption and destructive practices of social performances, including those focused on destruction, disposal, play, and symbolic or hedonistic consumption (Arsel and Thompson 2011; Kozinets 2002; Seregina and Weijo 2017).

Third, we take a broad perspective to conceptualize destructive enactments by social collectives (including tournaments of destruction) around four emergent themes: spaciotemporal visibility, the intentionality of destruction, focused gatherings and collective effervescence, and sociomoral condemnation of destruction. Each theme offers opportunities for future work, as individuals, collectives, and social movements are increasingly involved in protest-oriented destruction of brands (Nike and Colin Kaepernick), historical landmarks and symbols (BLM protesters toppling Confederate statues), and retailers and manufacturers (Animal Rising activists destroying property advocating for animal rights). Moreover, contrasting the practices and emotional energy of these ideologically-based destructive enactments with ritualized destruction has the potential to offer interesting insights in the domain of destruction. Additional work might explore other aspects of purveyors of destruction, for example firms as destroyers, as they destroy excess or low-quality merchandise, recalls, and factory overruns.

Finally, understanding destruction more generally is worthy of investigation. Herein, we explored consumers engaged in tournaments of destruction as they seek visibility in their local

environment. Yet, social groups, even loosely organized, engage in destruction, such as after sporting events or political victories *and* defeats. Understanding destruction as celebration in victory and despair in defeat presents an interesting avenue for research. Our research examined valued material objects, but the destruction of intangibles is of increasing interest. For example, exploring why and how individuals, collectives, companies, or the media are intent on destroying brand images, celebrity images, or company images, including the use of social media as a platform for destructive practices is warranted. Our work brings attention to conspicuous destruction as a facet of social performance, yet the domain space for exploring destruction is unbounded with myriad research opportunities.

DATA COLLECTION STATEMENT

Our author team specified primary data collection efforts for this research, including sampling frame (African males, at least 18 years of age who were Izikhothane subculture members, with representation from a variety of crews), interview protocol development and refinement, and specification of interview logistics for all data collections. The author team worked closely with INFUSION Knowledge Hub (IKH), a South African-based participatory research firm, familiar with local conventions and languages. In Summer 2015, Liezl-Marié van der Westhuizen (member of the author team) supervised three primary data collections in Soweto, South Africa. Liezl-Marié van der Westhuizen trained four female Black African interviewers to conduct our primary data collections and iteratively worked with them to refine our interview protocol and interviewers' probing techniques. Based on our criteria, IKH identified initial informants from their local network and used snowballing and network sampling to recruit additional informants, including preliminary depth interviews (n = 4), a focus group (n = 5), and depth interviews (n = 39). Informants received a R150 (South African Rand) [~$12; R12.09 = 1 USD in August 2015]

shopping voucher for participation. For the interviews and the focus group, an interviewer and photographer met the informant(s) at a location of their choosing. The interviewer assured informant confidentiality and conducted the interview in the informant's chosen language (English or Zulu), with translation to English as needed. The author team engaged a field team (three INFUSION interviewers and one photographer) to attend an Izikhothane battle at Florida Lake, Soweto in June 2015. In Summer 2018, the author team developed an initial depth interview protocol and hired one of the 2015 INFUSION interviewers to recruit 14 informants (per budget constraints). Liezl-Marié van der Westhuizen met with the interviewer to discuss a contact strategy and review our interview protocol and supervised the data collection. Using local networks, the interviewer began to recontact 2015 informants, and after 15 contacts, identified 14 informants interested in participating in this second interview. Informants received a R250 (South African Rand) [~$19; R13.27 = 1 USD in June 2018] shopping voucher for participation. The interviewer met the informant at a location of their choosing in Soweto, South Africa and assured informant confidentiality. All data (notes, transcripts, and photographs) are stored in a Dropbox folder under the management of the first author. The authors independently reviewed all data and jointly analyzed all data.

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