GameStop and the Reemergence of the Retail Investor

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ARTICLE

GAMESTOP AND THE REEMERGENCE OF THE RETAIL INVESTOR

JILL E. FISCH*

ABSTRACT

The GameStop trading frenzy in January 2021 was perhaps the highest profile example of the reemergence of capital market participation by retail investors—a marked shift from the growing domination of those markets by large institutional investors. Some commentators have greeted retail investing, which has been fueled by app-based brokerage accounts and social media, with alarm and called for regulatory reform. The goals of such reforms are twofold. First, critics argue that retail investors need greater protection from the risks of investing in the stock market. Second, critics argue that the stock market, in turn, needs protection from retail investors.

This Article challenges calls for broad regulatory reform. It reasons that, although retail investing is likely to impact the capital markets, claims about the harms from increased retail investing are overstated. More importantly, the debate overlooks potential benefits from retail investing, both to investors themselves and the capital markets. Regulators should not clamp down on the conditions, such as commission-free trading, gamified trading platforms, and the expanded use of social media, that have enabled a generation of new investors to participate in the capital markets. These innovations, through their ability to facilitate direct market participation by retail investors, have the potential to democratize the capital markets and increase the connections between ordinary citizens and U.S. businesses. Regulators should instead be focusing on how to facilitate the effectiveness of that process.

This Article defends the reemergence of the retail investor and its potential promise in enabling citizen capitalism—providing ordinary citizens with a stake

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in the nation’s productivity while, at the same time, increasing the accountability of those businesses to societal interests. It explains that retail investment can reduce the increasingly problematic power of institutional intermediaries. It also holds the possibility of increasing corporate consideration of stakeholder interests without the need for formal structural changes or heavy-handed regulation.

Critically, however, effective citizen capitalism requires retail shareholders to participate in the capital markets on an informed basis. Although the extent to which the GameStop frenzy reflected rational investing behavior is questionable, the frenzy drew retail investors to the market, and there is evidence that retail investment and engagement will both continue and evolve. This Article identifies opportunities to improve the retail investing experience, including greater oversight of sources of investment information, limits on the manipulative use by brokers of customer information, and the extension of fintech innovation to mechanisms for improving financial literacy. Attention to these concerns, rather than heavy-handed efforts to discourage retail investing, will increase the effectiveness of the retail investor.
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INTRODUCTION

The GameStop trading frenzy in January 2021 marked a reemergence of the retail investor in the securities markets. An unprecedented number of new and largely inexperienced investors opened app-based brokerage accounts and began trading so-called “meme stocks”—companies that included GameStop, AMC Entertainment Holdings, Inc. (“AMC”), and Express. Interest in these stocks—interest that critics argued was divorced from fundamentals—was fueled by posts on social media. The trading led to high levels of market volatility and charges of market manipulation. Several hedge funds that shorted the meme stocks suffered significant trading losses, and at least one retail-oriented brokerage firm faced dramatically increased capital requirements, forcing it to

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1 Historically, most stock in the United States was owned by retail investors. Sarah Haan notes, for example, that “a 1948 survey of major manufacturing corporations found that 91% of common stockholders were individuals, and that those individuals (men, women, and joint accounts) held a combined average of 59% of outstanding issues.” Sarah C. Haan, Corporate Governance and the Feminization of Capital, 74 Stan. L. Rev. 515, 526 n.45 (2022) (citing Who Owns “Big Business”? Analysis of Stockholdings in Largest Corporations (pt. 1), 87 Trs. & Ests. 5, 6 (1948)). Although institutional investors own 70-80% of most large public companies today, the institutionalization of the markets is a relatively recent phenomenon. See Jill E. Fisch, Rethinking the Regulation of Securities Intermediaries, 158 U. Pa. L. Rev. 1961, 1962-63 (2010) [hereinafter Fisch, Securities Intermediaries] (“The ownership of public equity has shifted substantially from retail to institutional investors since Congress enacted the federal securities laws in the 1930s.”); Jill E. Fisch, Mutual Fund Stewardship and the Empty Voting Problem, 16 Brook. J. Corp. Fin. & Com. L. 71, 72 (2021) [hereinafter Fisch, The Empty Voting Problem].


4 See, e.g., Dave Michaels, GameStop Frenzy Prompts Criminal DOJ Probe—Investigation to Look for Any Evidence of Market Manipulation in Recent Price Swings, WALL ST. J., Feb. 12, 2021, at A1 (“Federal prosecutors are investigating whether market manipulation or other types of criminal misconduct fueled the rapid rise last month in prices of stocks such as GameStop Corp . . . .”).

5 See, e.g., Laurence Fletcher, Hedge Fund that Bet Against GameStop Shuts Down, FIN. TIMES (June 22, 2021), https://www.ft.com/content/397bdbe9-f257-4ca6-b600-1756804517b6 [https://perma.cc/R6LH-LMSM] (reporting “big losses” for Melvin Capital and Light Street Capital).
limit trading temporarily. Regulators demanded information, and in 2021, Congress held four hearings.

The GameStop frenzy may have been a product of the times—investors confined by the pandemic lockdown and flush with stimulus checks seeking a form of engagement and entertainment. Whether the new investors who downloaded the Robinhood and Webull apps, lured perhaps by free stock promotions and confetti, will continue as long-term direct investors or move on with their lives remains to be seen. Their emergence, however, raises serious questions about the role of retail investors in the capital markets.


retirement plans, and professional advisors. The role of these intermediaries was to shelter retail investors from the risks associated with direct investing, including poorly informed trades, insufficient diversification, costly products, and fraud. Regulators focused their attention on protecting retail investors from these intermediaries by questioning the size and structure of their fees and seeking to mitigate potential conflicts of interest.

The result of this intermediation was tremendous growth in the size and importance of institutional investors. Institutional investors took up the mantle of effecting market discipline through their trading decisions. Similarly, institutional investors became the driving force behind shareholder voting, most recently using the votes that they exercise on behalf of their beneficiaries to demand that issuers pay greater attention to environmental, social, and governance (“ESG”) issues such as climate change. Commentators now worry that institutional investors exercise too much power—that their herding behavior jeopardizes market stability and their common ownership limits the competitive behavior of their portfolio companies. Remarkably little attention is paid, however, to retail investors.

The GameStop frenzy upset these norms and, as such, poses new challenges for capital market regulation. Critics argue that retail investors need to be protected from the capital markets—from Reddit and gamification-fueled investments in meme stocks and from using margin trading and options in connection with those investments. These critics further argue that the capital markets need to be protected from retail investors whose behavior contributes to market volatility, increases systemic risk, and undermines allocational

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9 See, e.g., Fisch, The Empty Voting Problem, supra note 1, at 72 (“[I]nstitutional investors in the United States own 70-80% of the stock in large publicly-traded companies.”); Fisch, Securities Intermediaries, supra note 1, at 1963 (reporting that, at the end of 2008, 92% of the money in the mutual fund industry was contributed by the household sector).


11 See Fisch, Securities Intermediaries, supra note 1, at 1965 (discussing regulatory efforts to address intermediary excessive fees and conflicts of interest).


14 See Fisch, The Empty Voting Problem, supra note 1, at 77-78 (describing BlackRock and Vanguard’s support for shareholder proposals addressing climate change).


16 See infra Section II.A.
efficiency.\textsuperscript{17} Congress and the Securities and Exchange Commission ("SEC") are investigating a variety of regulatory changes in response to these concerns that could include restrictions on payment for order flow, transaction-based fees or taxes, limits on the use of social media in connection with securities trading, and increased compliance requirements for brokerage firms that serve the retail market.\textsuperscript{18}

In considering whether a regulatory response to the GameStop frenzy is warranted, however, regulators should consider more carefully the potential costs and benefits of increased retail participation in the securities markets. This Article argues that existing calls for such a response have overstated the costs of retail trading and overlooked the benefits. In particular, this Article challenges the idea that it is somehow dangerous or inappropriate for retail investors to purchase securities that are traded in the highly regulated U.S. public markets and are issued by corporations that publish reports on a regular basis about their financial condition and business operations that are audited and subject to SEC oversight for accuracy.

The central contribution of this Article is to make the affirmative case for the benefits of increased engagement by retail investors in the capital markets. This Article explains that retail investing has the potential to increase the involvement of ordinary citizens in the country’s economic development. The current trend has engaged a population that has not traditionally participated in the capital markets and offers them the opportunity to realize the economic rewards of such participation. Retail investing offers a valuable counterpoint to the increased concentration and herding by institutional investors, particularly the largest mutual fund sponsors. Finally, retail investing has the potential to enhance the accountability and legitimacy of business and its leaders.

This is not to understate the fact that a shift to increased retail investment creates new challenges and is likely to impose costs. Investors will make mistakes and lose money. Stock prices may be more volatile, and traditional market participants will have to adjust their behavior to account for the reemergence of retail. Rather than focusing on keeping retail investors out of the

\textsuperscript{17} See infra Section II.B.

\textsuperscript{18} See, e.g., Letter from Elizabeth Warren, Sen., U.S. Senate, to Allison Herren Lee, Acting Chair, U.S. Sec. & Exch. Comm’n (Jan. 29, 2021), https://www.warren.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/01.29.2021%20Letter%20from%20Senator%20Warren%20to%20Acting%20Chair%20Lee.pdf [https://perma.cc/S7D3-ZUEA] (asking SEC to explain steps it will take to (1) “ensure that securities markets better reflect prices that are in line with the intrinsic and fundamental value of underlying companies” and (2) “update and implement rules defining market manipulation”); Gary Gensler, Chair, U.S. Sec. & Exch. Comm’n, Prepared Remarks at the Global Exchange and FinTech Conference (June 9, 2021), https://www.sec.gov/news/speech/gensler-global-exchange-fintech-2021-06-09 [https://perma.cc/NEB2-SZJL] (“I’ve asked staff to make recommendations for the Commission’s consideration on best execution, Regulation [National Market System], payment for order flow (both on-exchange and off-exchange), minimum pricing increments, and the [National Best Bid and Offer], with the aim of continuing to make our markets as efficient as possible.”).
market, however, this Article argues that the lesson for regulators from the GameStop frenzy is the need to understand the new drivers of retail investing and to ensure that those drivers promote informed and efficient investing behavior. Toward that end, this Article focuses on the information sources used by retail investors, the possible misuse of customer information by app-based brokers, and the potential to harness the power of fintech to increase investor financial literacy.

Beginning with a brief overview of the GameStop trading frenzy and its extension to broader direct retail participation in the capital markets, this Article then highlights the factors that likely contributed to the frenzy. Part II identifies the problems that have been attributed to the increased retail participation in the capital markets associated with the GameStop frenzy. Part III critically evaluates these problems and argues that they are, for the most part, overstated. Part IV defends increased retail engagement with the capital markets both from the perspective of individual investors and broader society. Part V briefly identifies lessons from GameStop about how to improve the retail investing experience.

I. BACKGROUND: THE GAMESTOP FRENZY

Shares in GameStop stock increased from less than $4/share in July 2020 to as high as $483 in January 2021.¹⁹ Millions of retail investors bought GameStop stock in early 2021, and on several days it was the most actively traded stock on Wall Street.²⁰ Its price swings were so large that the New York Stock Exchange halted trading six times in a single day.²¹ GameStop was the most visible of a number of so-called “meme stocks” that experienced similar retail investor interest and trading volatility.²²


²² A “meme” stock has been described as “a stock, popular with millennial-aged retail traders, that trades more on hype than its underlying fundamentals.” Thomas Niels, 9 Meme Stocks That Social Media Won’t Shut Up About, NASDAQ (Feb. 12, 2021, 1:54 PM), https://www.nasdaq.com/articles/9-meme-stocks-that-social-media-wont-shut-up-about-
The GameStop story began with GameStop, a Fortune 500 company whose primary business is the sale of videogames and consumer electronics. GameStop was founded in 1996 and conducted its initial public offering in 2002. Its shares are listed on the New York Stock Exchange. GameStop’s business initially focused primarily on the sale of new videogames through its thousands of retail stores; it subsequently developed a distinctive business model of buying used videogames from its customers and reselling them.

Over time, GameStop lost market share to competitors that relied on digitalized sales of downloadable games. It has failed to earn a profit since 2017. GameStop’s poor financial condition was exacerbated when the COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020 forced it to close its retail stores, many of which were in empty shopping malls. In August 2020, GameStop stock was trading at around $4/share.

Retail investor interest in GameStop began with a few small investors, including Keith Gill. According to his congressional testimony, Gill began to follow GameStop and to purchase its stock as early as 2019. In August 2020, GameStop stock was trading at around $4/share. 


30 Game Stopped? Part I, supra note 8, at 13 (statement of Keith Patrick Gill, GameStop Investor).
Gill posted a YouTube video in which he publicly touted the company’s stock. Gill stated in the video that his interest in GameStop was based on several factors, including a dedicated customer base for its legacy business and its potential as “an established, uniquely positioned player in a thriving $150 billion gaming industry . . . to reinvent itself as a premier gaming hub.” In particular, Gill believed that GameStop could pursue new revenue streams by embracing the technology-driven digital economy.

Gill decided to share his enthusiasm for GameStop on social media. In addition to YouTube, where he went by the name “Roaring Kitty,” Gill, using the name “DeepF***ingValue” or “DFV,” posted his views about GameStop to a chat forum hosted by Reddit, under the subreddit “WallStreetBets.” Participants in WallStreetBets share an interest in stock and option trading. The r/wallstreetbets page was started in 2012 and gained millions of new followers during the pandemic lockdown and the related stock market volatility.

Gill was not the only investor who viewed GameStop as an attractive investment. In August 2020, former Chewy co-founder Ryan Cohen publicly reported that he had purchased 9.6% of GameStop stock. Cohen subsequently approached GameStop management and offered a vision to turn the company around. When his initial private overtures to the company were rebuffed,

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32 Id.
33 Game Stopped? Part I, supra note 8, at 14 (statement of Keith Patrick Gill, GameStop Investor) (arguing that “GameStop may be able to find new revenue streams” through its “unique opportunity to pivot toward a technology-driven business”).
Cohen sent the GameStop board a public letter calling for a strategic review.\textsuperscript{39} Cohen’s efforts led the price of GameStop to increase from its August low.\textsuperscript{40} However, GameStop reported dismal earnings on December 8, 2020, and the next day its stock price fell to $13.66/share.\textsuperscript{41}

Some commentators anticipated that GameStop, like many other retailers, would file for bankruptcy because of the pandemic and the lockdown.\textsuperscript{42} Despite Cohen’s optimism, several hedge funds were skeptical that his plan would succeed in turning the company around and took substantial short positions.\textsuperscript{43} By the end of the year, approximately 140\% of GameStop’s public float had been sold short.\textsuperscript{44}

What followed was a strange combination of events. Gill’s postings excited a number of retail investors who followed the r/wallstreetbets page, including many who sought to squeeze the short sellers by purchasing GameStop stock and driving up the price.\textsuperscript{45} New investors opened brokerage accounts to invest in GameStop, and investor interest expanded to other meme stocks, including AMC, Blackberry, and Nokia (collectively BANG), as well as Koss, Tilray, Bed Bath & Beyond, and MicroVision.\textsuperscript{46} These stocks saw their prices rise in response to interest on social media.\textsuperscript{47} They also experienced substantial volatility.\textsuperscript{48} According to one source, the GameStop frenzy led 28\% of U.S. investors to invest in GameStop or other meme stocks in January 2021.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{39} See id.
\textsuperscript{40} See GameStop Historical Data, supra note 19 (documenting rise in GameStop’s trading price to as high as $17.50/share).
\textsuperscript{41} Id.
\textsuperscript{43} These included Melvin Capital and Citron Capital. Thorbecke, supra note 36.
\textsuperscript{44} John McCrank, Explainer: How Were More than 100\% of GameStop’s Shares Shorted?, REUTERS (Feb. 18, 2021, 11:15 AM), https://www.reuters.com/article/us-retail-trading-shortselling-explainer/explainer-how-were-more-than-100-of-gamestops-shares-shorted-idUSKBN2AI2DD [https://perma.cc/XW6D-745Y] (reporting that “GameStop’s peak short interest was 141.8\% of its float on Jan. 4[, 2021]”).
\textsuperscript{45} Philip van Doorn, We Put AMC, GameStop and Other Meme Stocks’ Numbers to the Test—Here’s Which Ones Came Out on Top, MARKETWATCH (June 8, 2021, 2:02 PM), https://www.marketwatch.com/story/we-put-these-eight-meme-stocks-through-a-rugged-analytical-test-which-are-poised-for-growth-and-which-have-big-downsides-11622810160.
\textsuperscript{46} Id.
\textsuperscript{47} See id.
\textsuperscript{48} See id.
\textsuperscript{49} Ethan Wolff-Mann, 28% of Americans Bought GameStop or Other Viral Stocks in January: Yahoo Finance-Harris Poll, YAHOO! FIN. (Feb. 9, 2021), https://www.yahoo.com/now/gamestop-amc-reddit-investing-213609595.html [https://perma.cc/H4LU-WSN3].
In January 2021, GameStop announced that it was receptive to Cohen’s plan and agreed to add him and two other former Chewy executives to its board.50 The combination of Cohen’s activism and the pressure on the short sellers led GameStop’s price to increase dramatically, and, in turn, those price increases fueled further purchases.51 Social media posts encouraged investors to buy GameStop, contributing to the effort to drive prices higher.52 Investor interest was also spurred by some high-profile tweets, including posts by Elon Musk and Chamath Palihapitiya.53 GameStop’s relatively small market capitalization and the high level of short interest exacerbated the volatility of its stock price in response to these developments.54

App-based trading platforms facilitated retail trading in GameStop.55 Robinhood and Webull were two of the most popular platforms.56 Both were easy to use, allowed customers to open an account merely by downloading the app on their phone or mobile device, provided trading on the mobile platform, required no minimum account balance, and did not charge account fees or commissions.57 According to CNBC, there were 3.7 million downloads of the Robinhood App in January 2021.58 In addition to being easy to use, these trading apps courted investors by offering them free shares of stock for opening accounts.

51 See George Calhoun, GameStop: Were the Short Sellers Routed? Does It Matter? (Beware the ‘Gamma’), FORBES (Mar. 19, 2021, 4:37 PM), https://www.forbes.com/sites/georgecalhoun/2021/03/19/gamestop-were-the-short-sellers-routed-does-it-matter-beware-the-gamma/?sh=4f76a30c4da (explaining how stock price can respond to efforts by short sellers to cover their positions).
53 Thorbecke, supra note 36; see Elon Musk, @elonmusk, TWITTER (Jan. 26, 2021, 4:08 PM), https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1354174279894642703.
or inviting friends to do so\textsuperscript{59} and by rewarding investors with confetti for actions like completing their first trade.\textsuperscript{60} They also reinforced investor interest in GameStop and other meme stocks by providing investors with lists of popular and trending stocks.\textsuperscript{61} The retail boom was not limited to platforms like Robinhood, however. In 2020, online broker Charles Schwab gained 4 million new investors, over half of whom were under 40.\textsuperscript{62} Similarly, Fidelity has opened 12.7 million new retail customer accounts since March 2020.\textsuperscript{63} Many investors opened brokerage accounts in response to the hype on r/wallstreetbets and looked to social media for guidance on their trading strategies.\textsuperscript{64}

The unprecedented retail trading had systemic implications. On January 28, 2021, several retail trading platforms abruptly restricted transactions in GameStop and other meme stocks. Robinhood banned new purchases of thirteen stocks.\textsuperscript{65} Webull imposed trading restrictions on three stocks.\textsuperscript{66} TD Ameritrade announced that it was restricting trading in GameStop and AMC.\textsuperscript{67} Schwab

\textsuperscript{59} See Sheth, supra note 56 (describing details of free stock promotions on multiple trading platforms).
\textsuperscript{60} See David Ingram, Designed to Distract: Stock App Robinhood Nudges Users to Take Risks, NBC NEWS (Sept. 12, 2019, 2:59 PM), https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/confetti-push-notifications-stock-app-robinhood-nudges-investors-toward-risk-n1053071 [https://perma.cc/MW6L-AUWN] (reporting concerns that Robinhood’s platform design has “elements of fun” that may encourage users to “develop risky habits that will cost [them] money over time”).
\textsuperscript{63} Justin Baer, Fidelity, Once Stodgy, Bets on the Reddit Crowd, WALL ST. J., Jan. 26, 2022, at A1.
\textsuperscript{64} Robinhood, for example, reported that the number of funded accounts increased from 7.2 million in March 2020 to 18 million in March 2021. Adelia Cellini Linecker, Robinhood IPO to Tap Meme Stocks Crowd as Filing Reveals Soaring Growth, INV.’S BUS. DAILY (July 1, 2021, 4:04 PM), https://www.investors.com/news/robinhood-ipo-to-tap-meme-stock-crowd-huge-share-for-retail-investors/ [https://perma.cc/89EV-NEQX].
\textsuperscript{65} Brian Barrett, Robinhood Restricts GameStop Trading—In a Bid to Save Itself, WIRED (Jan. 29, 2021, 6:45 AM), https://www.wired.com/story/robinhood-gamestop-stock/.
tightened its restrictions on investors’ ability to purchase certain meme stocks on margin.\textsuperscript{68} Interactive Brokers Group announced that investors could unwind but not establish new options positions in five meme stocks.\textsuperscript{69}

Critics of the trading halts argued that the brokers were seeking to protect hedge fund short sellers from the impact of further price increases.\textsuperscript{70} The brokers offered different but varying explanations. Schwab, Webull, and TD Ameritrade, for example, cited volatility and market instability.\textsuperscript{71} Robinhood pointed to dramatically increased capital requirements and costs associated with clearing the trades.\textsuperscript{72} Most of the trading restrictions were removed within a single day.\textsuperscript{73} Robinhood announced that it had raised more than $1 billion of new capital to meet the capital requirements.\textsuperscript{74} Despite their relatively short duration, the trading halts sparked outrage among investors and led some lawmakers to call for congressional hearings.\textsuperscript{75} Dozens of lawsuits were filed against Robinhood and other companies.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{68} Id.
\textsuperscript{69} Id.
\textsuperscript{70} See, e.g., Barrett, supra note 65 ("Many of Robinhood’s detractors accuse the company of acting in the interest of institutional short sellers rather than the individual retail investors that rely on it.").
\textsuperscript{71} DeCambre, supra note 67; Crowley, supra note 66.
\textsuperscript{72} See Game Stopped? Part I, supra note 8, at 115 (written testimony of Vladimir Tenev, CEO, Robinhood Markets, Inc.) ("[T]he trading limits we put in place on GameStop and other stocks were necessary to allow us to continue to meet the clearinghouse deposit requirements that we pay to support customer trading on our platform.").
\textsuperscript{73} Tara Siegel Bernard & Gillian Friedman, After an Outcry, Robinhood Says It Will Allow Users to Trade GameStop Again on Friday, N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 30, 2021), https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/28/business/robinhood-gamestop-restrictions.html ("Several retail stockbrokers, including Robinhood, said they would allow trades of GameStop and other volatile companies after restricting customers’ ability to purchase securities earlier in the day.").
\textsuperscript{74} Kate Kelly, Erin Griffith, Andrew Ross Sorkin & Nathaniel Popper, Needing Cash, Robinhood Raises $1 Billion from Existing Investors, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 30, 2021, at B4.
In subsequent months, Ryan Cohen succeeded in becoming chairman of GameStop and replaced its board of directors and executive team, an effort that included hiring a new Chief Executive Officer (“CEO”) from Amazon.\(^77\) Whether the new team will be successful in turning the company around remains to be seen.\(^78\) Although the stock price has not risen to anywhere near its January 2021 high, it has traded near or above $100/share consistently.\(^79\)

Although interest in meme stocks declined after the winter of 2021, retail investors have not dropped out of the market.\(^80\) As pandemic-related restrictions are lifted and people return to offices and social interactions, the appeal of app-based stock trading and social media may fade, as will the liquidity provided by the pandemic stimulus checks. Similarly, the broad market decline in the spring of 2022 has led to reduced retail trading activity and could cause some new investors to exit from the markets entirely.\(^81\) At the same time, the GameStop frenzy has left millions of new investors with brokerage accounts, making retail investor engagement in the capital markets an issue of ongoing concern.\(^82\)

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\(^{79}\) *GameStop Historical Data*, supra note 19.


Some have called for regulatory intervention. Senator Elizabeth Warren wrote to the SEC demanding that it respond to the GameStop frenzy. Commonly voiced concerns include that investors, either individually or collectively, used social media to manipulate the price of GameStop, and that Robinhood violated securities laws by temporarily restricting investors from purchasing GameStop stock. The SEC released a request for comment on digital engagement practices ("DEP"), citing the potential for DEP, including the gamification of stock trading through brokerage apps, to lead to frequent or risky trading. The SEC also announced that, in light of the GameStop frenzy, it would review payment for order flow and existing rules governing short selling. In addition, the SEC staff released a report on October 14, 2021, stating that "[t]he extreme volatility in meme stocks in January 2021 tested the capacity and resiliency of our securities markets in a way that few could have anticipated" and identifying aspects of the regulatory framework that warranted further

83 See, e.g., James J. Angel, Gamestonk: What Happened and What to Do About It 14, 34-36 (Georgetown McDonough Sch. of Bus., Working Paper No. 3782195, 2021), https://ssrn.com/abstract=3782195 [https://perma.cc/KPY4-SFXW] (advocating reforms to regulation of short selling and broker dealer compensation practices); Who Wins on Wall Street?, supra note 8, at 13 (written testimony of Gina-Gail S. Fletcher, Professor of Law, Duke University School of Law) (urging regulators to be “more thoughtful about what financial products are available to retail investors”); Kyle Langvardt & James Fallows Tierney, On "Confetti Regulation": The Wrong Way to Regulate Gamified Investing, 131 YALE L.J. 717, 737 (2022) (advocating regulating app-based design features that encourage excessive trading through concept of “behavioral churning”); see also Ryan Clements, Misaligned Incentives in Markets: Envisioning Finance that Benefits All of Society, 19 DePaul Bus. & COM. L.J. 1, 60-61 (2021) (citing range of potential regulatory responses to GameStop frenzy, “including changes to trading halts, increasing capital requirements on hedge funds, increasing transparency and limiting stock buybacks, consumer protection measures, and imposing disclosure requirements on social media platforms and forums like Reddit where sophisticated investors (like hedge funds) can exploit novice investors with the protection of anonymity”).

84 Letter from Elizabeth Warren, supra note 18.


86 Request for Comment on Digital Engagement Practices, supra note 7, at 49067-69 (“DEPs can potentially harm retail investors if they prompt them to engage in trading activities that may not be consistent with their investment goals or risk tolerance.”).

87 Dave Michaels, GameStop Saga Prompts SEC to Weigh Review of Payment for Order Flow, WALL ST. J. (Mar. 9, 2021, 2:05 PM), https://www.wsj.com/articles/gamestop-saga-prompts-sec-to-weigh-review-of-payment-for-order-flow-11615316739 (explaining that rise of commission-free trading has put more focus on controversy surrounding payment for order flow, “a practice that funnels many small investors’ stock orders to be filled by high-speed trading firms”).

In December 2020, the Massachusetts Attorney General filed an administrative complaint against Robinhood accusing it of presenting stock trading as a game and taking advantage of inexperienced investors. In April 2021, regulators sought to amend the claim to revoke Robinhood’s registration as a broker-dealer in Massachusetts. In July 2021, Robinhood disclosed investigations by a variety of other regulators, including the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority (“FINRA”) and the states of New York and California. The disclosure followed the announcement that Robinhood had agreed to pay FINRA a $70 million penalty to settle allegations of wrongdoing.


**Id.**

by academics and other experts. SEC Chair Gary Gensler, CEO of the Depository Trust & Clearing Corporation Michael C. Bodson, and FINRA CEO Robert Cook testified at the third hearing. Finally, the Senate hearing featured various researchers on capital markets. At the hearings, members of Congress and witnesses explored various potential concerns raised by the GameStop frenzy and debated a range of potential regulatory responses.

II. ADDRESSING THE GAMESTOP FRENZY

Commentators have identified two distinct sets of regulatory concerns arising out of the GameStop frenzy. One set focuses on investor protection. Based on the premise that retail investors, particularly those who participated in the frenzy, are vulnerable, the concerns cite the potential that others, including other investors, social media platforms, and brokerage firms, could exploit that vulnerability. The core theme is a need to protect retail investors from the market.

A separate set of concerns focuses on the market impact of the GameStop frenzy rather than the impact on individual market participants. These

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97 Game Stopped? Part III, supra note 8, at 5-6, 8.

98 Who Wins on Wall Street?, supra note 8, at 6-14.


100 See, e.g., Bob Pisani, Wall Street Worries About Regulatory Fallout from the GameStop Saga, CNBC (Feb. 4, 2021, 10:03 AM), https://www.cnbc.com/2021/02/04/wall-street-worries-about-regulatory-fallout-from-the-gamestop-saga.html [https://perma.cc/5ELN-KRP6] (describing concerns expressed by FINRA that “gamification may have caused investors to trade excessively or make investments not suitable for them”).

101 As Abe Cable explains, the concept of investor protection encompasses three distinct rationales—paternalistic investor protection, protection of investor choice, and protection of investor access. See Abraham J.B. Cable, Regulating Democratized Investing, Ohio St. L.J. (forthcoming 2022) (manuscript at 8-10), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4136828 [https://perma.cc/2RQ8-GN83]. Calls for regulatory reform in response to the GameStop frenzy are driven largely by paternalistic concerns and, as Cable explains, are likely to sacrifice investor choice and access. Id. (manuscript at 29, 33-34).

concerns are motivated less by paternalism than the prospect that price irrationality, volatility, and heavy trading volume have systemic consequences. A result, these commentators seek to protect the market from retail investors.

This Part considers and evaluates both sets of concerns.

A. Protecting Retail Investors from the Market

Commentators have written extensively about the retail investors who were caught up in the “meme” stock trading frenzy. As the articles note, a substantial number were inexperienced investors for whom the investment in GameStop and perhaps other meme stocks was their first venture into the capital markets. The investors who use Robinhood and other app-based trading platforms such as Webull tend to be younger and hold fewer assets than traditional retail investors. They also tend to be small investors. For example, the median account size at Robinhood is $240. Survey evidence suggests that new traders are overly optimistic about the likelihood that they will make money through their trading.

Critics warn that these investors are likely to lose money—money they cannot afford to lose. As one commentator put it, “fledgling investors, many of whom started trading on free trading apps like Robinhood during the pandemic, might not understand the intricacies of what is happening, leading to some incredibly risky bets with money they can’t afford to lose.” Another observed that “for

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See, e.g., Katie Martin & Robin Wigglesworth, Rise of the Retail Army: The Amateur Traders Transforming Markets, FIN. TIMES (Mar. 9, 2021), https://www.ft.com/content/7a91e3ea-b9ec-4611-9a03-a8dd3b8b1db5 [https://perma.cc/DN3L-5NBV] (“A Deutsche Bank survey found that almost half of US retail investors were completely new to the markets in the past year.”).

See id.; Nathaniel Popper, Robinhood Has Lured Young Traders, Sometimes with Devastating Results, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 25, 2021, at B1 (noting that average age of Robinhood investors is thirty-one and half of Robinhood investors have never invested before).


See Popper, supra note 104 (observing that inexperience of Robinhood traders can lead to “staggering losses”).

many [investors] who are younger and less experienced, meme investing ratchets the old idea of a stock tip up to a whole new level of virality and financial risk.”

The potential vulnerability of meme investors is increased by the mechanisms by which they are trading. Some of these new investors engage in substantial margin trading—trading with borrowed funds rather than using cash deposited in their accounts. The allure of app-based trading and the hype associated with meme stocks may cause retail investors both to trade excessively and to incur excessive debt. Margin trading increases the risk associated with trades both by increasing investors’ exposure to the market and by creating the potential for investors to lose more than they can afford.

As former TD Ameritrade CEO Joe Moglia explained, “leverage . . . can rip your arms off.” Indeed, data indicate that Robinhood customers were fourteen times more likely to default on their margin loans than the average investor. Although the Federal Reserve limits the percentage of a securities purchase that can be financed through borrowing, investors sometimes seek to circumvent these limits by using personal loans or credit card debt.

In addition, investors who purchase on


113 Stephen Gandel, Robinhood Offers Loans to Buy Stock—They Were 14 Times More Likely to Default, CBS NEWS (Feb. 5, 2021, 6:09 PM), https://www.cbsnews.com/news/robinhood-stock-loans-were-14-times-more-likely-to-default-than-rivals/ [https://perma.cc/IP9Q-SAKY]. One possible explanation is that Robinhood was more aggressive in enabling its customers to borrow because of the interest that it earned on those margin loans. See id. (describing stock lending as “one of Robinhood’s few profit centers”).

114 See Investor Bulletin: Understanding Margin Accounts, supra note 111 (“According to Regulation T of the Federal Reserve Board, you may borrow up to 50 percent of the purchase price of margin securities.”).

115 Lance Roberts, This Won’t End Well—Gen’rs Take on Debt to Invest, ADVISOR PERSPS. (Sept. 3, 2021), https://www.cbsnews.com/news/robinhood
margin bear the risk of a margin call, which, if the customer lacks the cash to meet, could result in the broker automatically selling the customer’s stock.\footnote{116 Mozée, supra note 112.}

Options further increase investor risk. Options provide an alternative way to increase investor buying power and were cited as a substantial factor boosting the demand for GameStop stock.\footnote{117 David Borun, How Options Trading Is Fueling the GameStop Rally, NASDAQ (Jan. 26, 2021, 4:50 PM), https://www.nasdaq.com/articles/how-options-trading-is-fueling-the-gamestop-rally-2021-01-26 (explaining how use of options increased GameStop demand and volatility).} Inexperienced traders are unlikely to understand how options work, however, or to evaluate the risk associated with their positions accurately. Although the brokerage industry imposes safeguards designed to limit the use of options by inexperienced investors, Robinhood has been criticized for failing to deploy these safeguards effectively and for allowing inexperienced investors to access margin loans and options too easily.\footnote{118 See News Release, Michelle Ong, Ray Pellecchia, Angelita Plemmer Williams & Andrew DeSouza, Fin. Indus. Regul. Auth., FINRA Orders Record Financial Penalties Against Robinhood Financial LLC (June 30, 2021), https://www.finra.org/mediacenter/newsreleases/2021/firna-orders-record-financial-penalties-against-robinhood-financial [https://perma.cc/Z54J-SJTJ] (stating that Robinhood “failed to exercise due diligence before approving customers to place options trades”).} One Robinhood investor, a 20-year-old student, committed suicide after his options trading through his Robinhood account led him to incorrectly believe he had a negative $730,000 account balance.\footnote{119 See Sarah Jackson, Robinhood Has Settled a Lawsuit over the Death of a 20-Year-Old Who Died by Suicide Last Year Thinking He Lost $730,000 on the Stock-Trading App, INSIDER (July 1, 2021, 5:59 PM), https://www.businessinsider.com/robinhood-settled-suit-suicide-20-year-old-trader-alex-kearns-2021-7 [https://perma.cc/5C85-SSJL]. Robinhood settled a wrongful death lawsuit over the suicide for an undisclosed amount. Id.}

A related concern is that retail customers are not really investing in meme stocks but are instead gambling.\footnote{120 See, e.g., Virk, supra note 109 (“[M]ost of the people putting money into the next big thing aren’t really investing; they are truly just gambling online.”); Madison Darbyshire, Traders Phone up Gambling Helplines as Game-Like Broker Apps Spread, FIN. TIMES (Oct. 6, 2021), https://www.ft.com/content/8f9bbc77-06b1-4fb6-8b7e-6e381ba038a7 [https://perma.cc/D37S-ADC2] (quoting statement of Keith Whyte, executive director of National Council on Problem Gambling, that “line between gambling and investing, which was already pretty fluid, has almost been completely erased”).} To many critics, purchases of meme stocks appear irrational and untethered to fundamentals. Traders may be seduced by a combination of the trading apps they use and the social media platforms from which they obtain their trading information. Terming the apps on which these investors trade “gamified” and “addictive,” commentators chastise the platforms
for pushing investors into inappropriate trading decisions. Trading platforms also increase herding by investors. Sites such as Robinhood publish lists of stocks that are popular among their customers and push this information on the app. Studies show that the inclusion of a stock on the list substantially increases customer trading of the stock.

Critics also challenge brokerage firms’ conflicts of interest, observing that the business models of Robinhood and the other app-based brokers rely on trading to generate income. Of particular concern is the fact that some trading apps earn a substantial amount of revenue from payment for order flow. Payment for order flow occurs when brokers route their customer orders to wholesalers for execution rather than directly to an exchange. In turn, wholesalers pay the brokerage rebates in exchange for those orders. In theory, the rebate does not increase the cost of the trade to the customer, whose order must be executed at the best price available. In reality, however, it is possible to generate price improvement for a customer in connection with a trade, and payment for order

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121 See Darbyshire, supra note 120 (quoting North American Securities Administrators Association as saying, “[b]y using features such as confetti, scratch-off style graphics and awards systems, certain firms are encouraging investors to make trades that may not be in their best interests and would conversely serve the interests of the broker-dealer”.

122 See, e.g., Brad M. Barber, Xing Huang, Terrance Odean & Christopher Schwarz, Attention-Induced Trading and Returns: Evidence from Robinhood Users, J. Fin. (forthcoming 2022) (manuscript at 28-29), https://ssrn.com/abstract=3715077 [https://perma.cc/1Z8D-CN9Z] (reporting that Robinhood focuses investor attention on certain stocks, encouraging herding and leading to lower investment returns).

123 See Stein, supra note 61 (describing Robinhood’s top 100 list).

124 Id. (reporting that customers were five to seven times more likely to buy stocks newly named to top 100 list).


127 Id.

128 The requirement of best execution is somewhat lax. See, e.g., Robert P. Bartlett, III, Modernizing Odd Lot Trading, 2021 COLUM. BUS. L. REV. 520, 525 (providing data demonstrating that odd lot trading rules reduce impact of best execution requirement for popular retail stocks on nonexchange trading venues).
flow generally results in the broker, rather than the customer, receiving the benefit of any potential price improvement.\footnote{See Stanislav Dolgopolov, \textit{Off-Exchange Market Makers and Their Best Execution Obligations: An Evolving Mixture of Market Reform, Regulatory Enforcement, and Litigation}, 17 N.Y.U. J.L. & Bus. 477, 512 (2021) ("Robinhood explicitly offered to accept less price improvement for its customers than what the principal trading firms were offering, in exchange for receiving a higher rate of payment for order flow for itself.").}

Although payment for order flow has been around since the 1980s, it appears that Robinhood is the first trading platform to receive virtually all of its revenue from this source.\footnote{John McCrank, \textit{Explainr: Robinhood Makes Most of Its Money from PFOF. What Is It?}, \textit{Reuters} (July 29, 2021), 11:59 AM, https://www.reuters.com/business/finance/robinhood-makes-most-its-money-pfof-what-is-it-2021-07-29/.} Robinhood earned an average of two-tenths of a penny for each share bought or sold.\footnote{SEC STAFF REPORT, \textit{supra} note 89, at 12, 44.} Payment for order flow can create an incentive for a broker to encourage its customers to engage in more trading than is appropriate for their investment objectives, a process that Kyle Langvardt and James Fallows Tierney term "behavioral churning."\footnote{See, e.g., Sue S. Guan, \textit{Meme Investors and Retail Risk}, 63 B.C. L. Rev. (forthcoming 2022) (manuscript at 11-12), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4002708 [https://perma.cc/K5A8-L6T9].} As SEC staff noted, payment for order flow “can create a conflict of interest for the retail broker-dealer” and that “payment for order flow and the incentives it creates may cause broker-dealers to find novel ways to increase customer trading, including through the use of digital engagement practices.”\footnote{Thinking About Investing in the Latest Hot Stock? Understand the Significant Risks of Short-Term Trading Based on Social Media, U.S. SEC. & EXCH. COMM’N: INV. ALERTS BULL. (Jan. 30, 2021), https://www.sec.gov/oiea/investor-alerts-and-bulletins/risks-short-term-trading-based-social-media-investor-alert [https://perma.cc/2BMA-HXKU]. One study empirically demonstrated that Reddit posts led to increased trading in GameStop shares. André Betzer & Jan Philipp Harries, \textit{How Online Discussion Board Activity Affects Stock Trading: The Case of GameStop}, \textit{FIN. MCKTS. & PORTFOLIO MGMT.} (Mar. 30, 2022), https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s11408-022-00407-w.pdf [https://perma.cc/SJ32-FPQS].}

Critics also raise concerns about the extent to which meme investors are influenced by social media.\footnote{Tomio Geron, \textit{Data Shows How Robinhood Makes More Money from Its Users than Other Brokers}, \textit{Protocol} (July 15, 2021), https://www.protocol.com/fintech/payment-for-order-flow [https://perma.cc/NP6G-HZY8].} Many investors opened brokerage accounts in response to the hype in the Reddit community known as WallStreetBets and then looked to social media (rather than trained investment professionals) for guidance on their trading strategies.\footnote{Langvardt & Fallows Tierney, \textit{supra} note 83, at 737.} In particular, commentators warn that investors may simply be following a social trend rather than investing based on
sound investment analysis. The anonymity of these platforms also increases the potential for misinformation and even manipulation. As the Washington Post observed: “With Reddit users cloaked in anonymity, there is no way of knowing whether messages touting GameStop come from average Joes—or scam artists executing a ‘pump-and-dump’ stock scheme.”

Finally, as this Article goes to press, the capital markets have suffered a substantial decline, with stocks falling more than 20 percent since the start of 2022. As a result, many retail investors who began investing during 2021 have suffered significant losses.

B. Protecting the Market from Retail Investors

The GameStop frenzy has also caused commentators to worry about the broader capital market impact of retail investing. Three related concerns dominate: volatility, systemic instability, and capital allocation.

As noted above, the price of GameStop and other meme stocks has been highly volatile. In a single day, GameStop’s price swings led to six trading halts. The level of short selling, coupled with the use of margin trading and options to leverage demand, fueled these price swings.

Volatility can exacerbate trading losses and generate higher levels of uninformed trading. It can also stress market mechanisms for pricing and clearing trades, lead to increased margin calls, and generate shortages in liquidity. The GameStop frenzy illustrated several of these concerns. The volatility of GameStop’s price created pressure on the outstanding short positions, forcing short sellers to purchase stock, often at inflated prices, to cover mounting losses. Trading volatility led to concern by clearinghouses about the potential for failed trades, particularly when the trades were executed on margin.


139 Conrad de Aenlle, Recession Worries and Bear Markets, N.Y. TIMES, July 17, 2022, at BU7.


141 Fox, supra note 21.

142 See SEC STAFF REPORT, supra note 89, at 17-22.
This, in turn, led those clearinghouses to demand higher deposits from retail brokerage firms such as Robinhood, which caused many such firms temporarily to halt trading in meme stocks.\textsuperscript{143}

One reason for these deposit requirements was the risk that failed trades impose on the system. If retail customers cannot pay for their trades, those losses may be passed on to brokerage firms and, in turn, affect the financial stability of counterparties to those trades or market intermediaries.\textsuperscript{144} In the past, large losses suffered by a customer have had potentially significant market-wide impacts, as in the case of Long Term Capital Management.\textsuperscript{145} The more recent Archegos case, in which a single family office’s inability to meet margin calls triggered a $20 billion sell-off in the market raised, similar concerns.\textsuperscript{146}

Although the GameStop frenzy does not appear to have had an impact on broader market stability,\textsuperscript{147} commentators view retail trading as presenting a similar potential for systemic risk. Congressman Stephen Lynch warned of retail trading’s potential to fuel systemic risk.\textsuperscript{148} Similarly, Senator Elizabeth Warren noted that the GameStop frenzy and the level of speculation it involved could prompt broader market sell-offs.\textsuperscript{149} She observed that the resulting market shift “also raises questions about broader instabilities in the market and financial system.”\textsuperscript{150}

\begin{flushright}
143 See supra notes 65-69 and accompanying text.
144 See SEC STAFF REPORT, supra note 89, at 31 (“[I]n highly volatile trading where share prices whipsaw by hundreds of dollars, NSCC may require more margin to guard against an increased risk of defaults.”).
147 See Matt Phillips, Matthew Goldstein & Ephrat Livni, S.E.C. Suggests No Policy Changes in Response to Meme Stock Frenzy, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 19, 2021, at B4 (stating SEC staff “found that everything worked largely the way it was supposed to”).
148 See Daniel, supra note 146.
149 Letter from Elizabeth Warren, supra note 18.
150 Id.
\end{flushright}
Retail trading may also reduce liquidity, which can raise transaction costs and reduce market efficiency. Sue Guan demonstrates how coordinated retail trading could reduce liquidity by leading to wider spreads by liquidity suppliers and other market participants.

The influx of retail market participants whose activities might be described as speculation rather than investing generates additional problems. Commentators warn that retail traders are “treat[ing] the stock market like a casino.” Market speculation both disrupts the link between prices and fundamental value and reduces investor confidence. To the extent that prices are distorted, they affect issuers’ costs of capital, enabling companies that do not have significant productive capacity to raise money more easily and raising the cost of capital for sound companies. AMC, for example, raised $1 billion in capital while its stock price was buoyed by the meme stock boom, and GameStop raised $1.7 million. Notably, in its prospectus, AMC cautioned investors that its current stock price reflected market dynamics unrelated to the company’s fundamental value, stating that “we caution you against investing in our Class A common stock, unless you are prepared to incur the risk of losing all or a substantial portion of your investment.”

As one commentator observed, “The capital markets exist to fund companies, create jobs, and drive our economy, while also helping millions of American families save for retirement, college, or to buy homes.” Another reasoned,

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151 Merritt B. Fox, Lawrence R. Glosten & Gabriel V. Rauterberg, Stock Market Manipulation and Its Regulation, 35 Yale J. on Reg. 67, 84 (2018) (“Liquidity is a multidimensional concept that relates to the size of a trade, the price at which it is accomplished, and the time it takes to accomplish the trade.”).


153 Guan, supra note 134 (manuscript at 28).

154 Letter from Elizabeth Warren, supra note 18.


Essential to the success of the markets is the notion that they are efficient, they reflect the allocation of capital to the most productive uses. Dramatic swings in share price, untethered from any rigorous economic analysis, and motivated by internet mob mentality, destroys this notion.\footnote{159}

III. EVALUATING THE NEED FOR REFORM

The foregoing concerns about the GameStop frenzy are legitimate. Many investors lost money, including some who lost more than they could afford to lose.\footnote{160} The price of GameStop stock fluctuated wildly, and the social media-fueled speculation spread to other companies. Social media-fueled trading sites present particular risks of fraud and manipulation, and app-based trading platforms challenge both existing broker-dealer practices and the manner in which those practices are regulated.

The link between these concerns and broadscale regulatory reform is, however, less compelling. While it is true that people can lose money through misguided stock purchases, people lose money in a variety of ways: by gambling, spending too much on a trendy fashion item, or incurring costly credit card debt. Although regulation seeks both to inform people about the consequences of these choices and to limit opportunism, a fundamental component of a free society is that people can make choices with which others might disagree. Regulating with the objective of preventing unwise investing decisions is paternalism.

Paternalism seems particularly misplaced with respect to investments that, like the meme stocks involved here, were publicly traded securities listed on national securities exchanges.\footnote{161} The extensive and expansive body of federal regulation was specifically designed to enable retail investors to purchase publicly traded securities and to protect them when doing so. Federal securities regulation is premised on the idea, however, that providing investors and the capital markets with full information is a more desirable regulatory approach


\footnote{161} For that reason, this Article focuses on meme stocks, and does not consider the extent to which its analysis extends to other financial instruments such as cryptocurrency or nonfungible tokens, which are not subject to the same regulatory scheme. See David Yaffe-Bellany, Erin Griffith & Ephrat Livni, *As Cryptocurrencies Melt Down, $300 Billion Evaporates in Days*, N.Y. TIMES, May 13, 2022, at A1 (reporting $300 billion losses in “experimental and unregulated digital currencies”).
than having the federal government screen potential investment opportunities for safety or quality.  

Additionally, the magnitude of harm to most individual investors associated with meme trading is quite small. A February 2021 poll found that, although 28% of survey respondents reported buying at least one meme stock, the median amount they invested was only $150. Most investors did not buy stock on margin or to trade in options. Of those who traded options, most used simple call options which enabled them to put down a smaller amount of money and profit if stock prices increased. If stock prices fell, investors would simply lose the cost of the option. Significantly, investor losses were likely on the order of what they might have lost on a prepandemic trip to Las Vegas or Atlantic City.

Although meme trading might lead some to argue that retail investors are better off delegating their investment decisions to trained professionals, commentators have long recognized that investing through intermediaries has flaws as well. These include the sometimes significant fees charged by those intermediaries, problematic sales practices, conflicts of interest, and simple incompetence—incapacitance that retail investors may be poorly positioned to

162 As Louis Brandeis put it, “Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants; electric light the most efficient policeman.” LOUIS D. BRANDEIS, OTHER PEOPLE’S MONEY AND HOW THE BANKERS USE IT 92 (1914).

163 Wolff-Mann, supra note 49.

164 See, e.g., Game Stopped? Part I, supra note 8, at 116 (written testimony of Vladimir Tenev, CEO, Robinhood Markets, Inc.) (stating as of end of 2020, only “about 13 percent of Robinhood customers traded basic options contracts (e.g., puts and calls), and only about two percent traded multi-leg options. Less than three percent of funded accounts were margin-enabled”).


identify. There is also a curious sense of elitism reflected in the commentary. Only a small percentage of retail investors own stock directly, and that stock ownership is concentrated in rich white men. For some, the prospect that app-based trading opens the capital markets to investors outside that narrow sphere suggests that something is wrong. But as SEC Commissioner Hester Peirce observes, “telling investors they cannot make decisions for themselves only supports their suspicions that the capital markets are for the wealthy.”

The criticisms that have been leveled at app-based trading platforms like Robinhood’s for gamifying stock trading are also problematic. As noted above, the SEC requested public comment on digital engagement practices, observing that game-like features and other design elements of the apps “may encourage investors to trade more often, invest in different products, or change their investment strategy.” The Massachusetts Attorney General brought an enforcement action against Robinhood for bringing gamification to investing. Essentially, the complaint alleged that Robinhood’s app, through features such as displaying confetti after a customer traded, made investing in the stock market entertaining for young investors in an effort to generate greater engagement.

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169 Ben Soppitt, *The Gamification of Investing Brings Opportunity—and Risks*, FORBES (Jan. 8, 2021, 7:00 AM), https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2021/01/08/the-gamification-of-investing-brings-opportunity--and-risks/ (“[I]nvesting has historically been the preserve of a small but wealthy minority, with normal consumers excluded through a mixture of cost and lack of information, awareness and access due to the archaic nature of traditional investment methods.”).


173 See Administrative Complaint, *supra* note 91, at 1.

174 Id. at 3.
Better Markets describes the app as “incorporating addictive, endorphin-engendering game features.” It is unclear, however, why investing should not be fun. Gaming has become an increasing part of everyday life, and gamification has been used to promote user engagement across a variety of areas, including healthcare, education, and banking. Gamification can help counteract some of the forces that lead people not to save and invest, such as the perception that investing is boring or complicated. In addition, gamification can have the positive effect of increasing people’s motivation not just to invest but to invest successfully, leading to greater take-up of tools to increase financial literacy.

A 2021 Charles Schwab survey, for example, reported those who began investing in 2020 were “hungry for access to investing education and advice.”

Similarly, from a market impact perspective, concerns over the effect of the meme trading frenzy appear overstated.


176 Letter from Tyler Gellasch, supra note 158, at 19.


178 Id.; see infra Section V.C.


180 Game Stopped? Part I, supra note 8, at 112 (written testimony of Jennifer J. Schulp, Director, Financial Regulation Studies, Cato Institute) (“[T]emporary volatility in GameStop and others did not present a systemic risk to the functioning of our markets.”).

of the overall market. As one article observes, citing industry experts, “it’s a stretch to think that extreme market movement in a few, relatively low-capitalized companies will have any major effect on the broader market.”

In addition, retail trading can potentially increase market stability by offsetting the herding by institutional investors that has the potential to exacerbate price swings. Jonathan Macey observes, for example, that “Robinhood investors had a stabilizing effect on the market during the turbulence surrounding the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, when the market dropped in value by one-third.” Similarly Gideon Ozik, Ronnie Sadka, and Siyi Shen report that “while overall liquidity deteriorated during lockdown, the increase in retail trading activity improved it, lowering stock bid-ask spreads and the price impact of trades.”

The characterization of trading in meme stocks as gambling also overstates the case. The capital markets include a wide range of investors with different motivations and time horizons and that use different sources of information. It is almost impossible to judge in advance whose analyses are likely to be correct. The evidence suggests, however, that a substantial proportion of retail money was invested not in idiosyncratic companies but in conservative companies that performed well.

Even investments in the more extreme meme stocks that generated herd-like behavior can be defended on fundamentals—fundamentals that, at least in some cases, appear to support the wisdom of the crowd. For example, activist Ryan Cohen’s increasing involvement in GameStop and the prospect that his proposed revisions to the company’s business strategy would result in a turnaround offered reasons to invest. Similarly, despite warning investors about the prospect that its stock price was inflated in 2021, AMC showed success in its

182 See, e.g., id. at 32 (reporting that Robinhood investors had 0.2% market share).
186 See SEC STAFF REPORT, supra note 89, at 43 (“People may disagree about the prospects of GameStop and the other meme stocks, but those disagreements are what should lead to price discovery rather than disruptions.”).
188 See supra notes 37-40, 50, 77 and accompanying text (discussing Cohen’s involvement in GameStop).
holiday operations and beat analyst expectations for Q4 2021. Although views on the street are mixed, analysts have also identified reasons to believe that other meme stocks have the potential for continued growth based on fundamental analysis rather than hype.

Hertz provides one of the best examples. Hertz was one of the original meme stocks in 2020, and commentators warned that it was an example of uninformed and irrational trading by retail investors flocking into a company that was headed for bankruptcy. As commentator William Cohan wrote in 2020: “It is all pure gambling. There is no circumstance—zero—where Hertz shareholders will ever get a recovery once a plan of reorganization with creditors is agreed upon, probably months from now.”

Yet, as Matt Levine subsequently acknowledged, Cohan “turned out to be totally wrong.” Almost a year later, Hertz accepted a buyout bid that enabled it to emerge from bankruptcy and to pay its investors more than what any retail investor had paid for the stock. Significantly, the meme frenzy was not just about investors getting lucky. Retail support for the companies, and their stock

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189 Will Feuer, AMC Revenue Guidance Beats Forecasts, Sending Stock Up, WALL ST. J., Feb. 2, 2021, 12:51 PM (“Shares of AMC Entertainment Holdings Inc. jumped as much as 13% in premarket trading after the company posted preliminary fourth-quarter results that showed revenue topping analyst expectations.”).


191 Emily Graffee, Hertz: The Original Meme Stock Rises from the Ashes of Bankruptcy, INSIDER: MKTS. INSIDER (Aug. 2, 2021, 12:00 PM), https://markets.businessinsider.com/news/currencies/hertz-original-reddit-wallstreetbets-meme-stock-exits-bankruptcy-2021-7 [https://perma.cc/2KYJ-EZ6Q] (“In a matter of weeks after the bankruptcy announcement, traders bid up shares of Hertz by 825% percent while Wall Street onlookers scratched their heads and wondered why retail investors were scooping up shares of a company that couldn’t meet its debt obligations.”).


193 Graffee, supra note 192.

194 Graffee, supra note 191.
prices, facilitated access by all three companies to capital that created new business opportunities that, in turn, arguably impacted their future prospects.  

Moreover, to the extent the concern is about speculation in the stock market, speculative trading is not limited to, or even concentrated in, retail investors. Many hedge funds use speculative trading strategies, including the extensive use of options and derivatives. Similarly, stock prices regularly depart from what some view to reflect fundamental value—bubbles and other examples of temporary misalignments are commonplace. Given the difficulty in determining when securities are under or overpriced, the claim that meme trading has distorted prices is a problematic justification for regulatory intervention.

IV. THE UNDERRECOGNIZED VALUE OF RETAIL INVESTING

The foregoing discussion summarizes and challenges the main concerns that commentators have raised over the GameStop frenzy. The call for regulatory intervention, and in particular for reforms that would introduce greater barriers to retail trading—such as banning payment for order flow, limiting user interfaces that make app-based trading easy and accessible, and attempting to limit the use of social media to disseminate investing information—focuses excessively on the potential costs imposed by retail trading. In so doing, the debate over GameStop overlooks the benefits of the reemergence of the retail investor. I argue in this Part that direct retail participation in the capital markets provides potential benefits to investors, corporations, and society—benefits that have largely been unrecognized. As Abe Cable has observed, current regulatory proposals are likely to “stamp out ultra-retail investing” thereby sacrificing these benefits.

For investors, capital market participation offers the opportunity for increased wealth. Fintech, through its lower costs and easy access, allows a broader range

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195 As Chiu and Yahya ask, “did [meme investors’] newfound faith in GameStop allow its management to discover new opportunities that did not exist prior to early 2021?” Victoria Chiu & Moin A. Yahya, The Meme Stock Paradox, 3 CORP. & BUS. L.J. 51, 89 (2022). Levine explains that the SEC seemingly restricted Hertz’s ability to obtain more capital through a public offering despite Hertz’s warning to stockholders that “we expect that common stockholders would not receive a recovery through any plan.” Levine, supra note 192.


197 See, e.g., Troy A. Paredes, On the Decision to Regulate Hedge Funds: The SEC’s Regulatory Philosophy, Style, and Mission, 2006 U. ILL. L. REV. 975, 1000 n.100 (“Nor, for that matter, should the SEC be in the business of regulating to prevent bubbles in any particular type of asset class or investment vehicle or to discourage speculation (in any case, how does one decide when a bubble exists or that there is excessive speculation?).”); Game Stopped? Part I, supra note 8, at 112 (written testimony of Jennifer J. Schulp, Director, Financial Regulation Studies, Cato Institute) (“Stock prices move in and out of alignment all the time, and markets are no strangers to bubbles.”).

198 Cable, supra note 101 (manuscript at 6).
of investors to engage with the markets, not just as passive investors but through the exercise of greater voice in corporate decisions. Direct retail ownership gives ordinary citizens both a connection to business and a stake in how business operates. Unlike efforts to increase the accountability of big corporations through external regulation, investment offers people the opportunity to influence businesses from within. Significantly, the GameStop frenzy highlights the new power of fintech and social media to reduce the collective action problems associated with dispersed retail ownership. Retail ownership can also reduce the potentially skewed influence of large institutional intermediaries who may be subject to problematic agency costs. Engaging ordinary citizens is particularly valuable at a time when the role of corporations in society is up for debate as commentators and policymakers question the relative merits of shareholder versus stakeholder governance.

A. GameStop and Capital Market Participation

As SEC Commissioner Hester Peirce recently observed, “Our financial markets are among the greatest wealth-generating machines ever developed by any society,” yet only about half of Americans participate in them through stock or mutual fund ownership. In addition, retail participation in the markets is highly skewed. Women are less likely to own stock than men. Minority households are far less likely to own stock than white households, and this lower rate of capital market participation substantially contributes to wealth disparity. Traditionally, younger investors have been less likely to invest in the stock market. As recently as 2016, one study reported that almost 80% of

millennials were not invested in the stock market at all. A 2021 Nasdaq Foundation study pointed to the ongoing underrepresentation of Black and Latinx women in the capital markets and highlighted the systemic factors that have contributed to the particular inability of this group to build wealth.

Although a variety of factors contribute to the disparity in capital market participation, one contributing factor is the inability of young and diverse households to relate to the intermediaries that have historically served as gatekeepers to the capital markets through their role as brokers and financial advisors. Most financial advisors, for example, are white, male, and over the age of fifty. This leaves many people with the inability to relate to or trust stock market investing, or with the belief that their business will not be welcome. As one commentator put it, “potential Black investors may feel that buying stocks is not for them.”

The cost of investing is another obstacle. Historically, brokerage accounts required a minimum investment, and the fees associated with maintaining an account and trading stock rapidly ate into the value of that investment. FINRA rules, for example, continue to require a minimum balance of $2000 in a margin account. For example, continue to require a minimum balance of $2000 in a margin account and trading stock rapidly ate into the value of that investment. FINRA rules, for example, continue to require a minimum balance of $2000 in a margin account.

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205 See Press Release, J.D. Power, Technology, Social Media Critical to Bridging Financial Advisor Age Gap, J.D. Power Finds (July 9, 2019), https://www.jdpower.com/business/press-releases/2019-us-financial-advisor-satisfaction-study [https://perma.cc/QVV5-6FVV] (reporting “average age of financial advisors is about 55, and approximately one-fifth of advisors are 65 or older”); Greg Iacurci, Diversity Among Financial Planners Improved in 2021—But It Still Remains Overwhelmingly White and Male, CNBC (Jan. 26, 2022, 2:11 PM), https://www.cnbc.com/2022/01/26/diversity-among-financial-planners-improved-in-2021-but-it-still-lags.html [https://perma.cc/H6VW-BQ68] (reporting that, of 92,055 certified financial planners in 2021, 83% were white, 76.6% were male, and 71.5% were forty or older); Blair duQuesnay, Consider Firing Your Male Broker, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 16, 2019, at A23 (reporting that fewer than 20% of financial advisors are women).

206 See Evans, supra note 201 (“Research shows that having someone who looks like you and has shared life experiences lead [sic] to more trust.”).

207 Choe, supra note 202.

account, although the minimum is not required for fully paid securities. The entry into the market of app-based brokers like Robinhood has led to the elimination of commissions even among traditional brokers. Commission-free trading makes it cost-effective for investors to purchase relatively small amounts of stock. The absence of account minimums and commissions makes it easier for new investors to start small and limit the risks that they take as they develop familiarity with the investment process. This flexibility is further enhanced by the sale of fractional shares or stock slices. As the dollar amount required to invest in a specific company decreases, small investors can diversify their portfolios more easily, reducing the risks associated with direct stock ownership and reducing the need for investors to purchase mutual funds to achieve diversification.

App-based trading platforms empower new, younger, and more diverse investors by removing the obstacle of a person who does not look like them. These new investors can participate on a small scale and develop a comfort level without concern about someone who views their account as too small or makes judgments about whether they belong in the market, a process that one commentator terms “financial redlining.”

Traditionally, retail investors have participated in the capital markets through investments that are highly intermediated. Most investors own equities through mutual funds, in which a portfolio manager chooses the individual securities. The asset manager also exercises the other aspects of stock ownership, such as participating in annual meetings and voting the shares. In addition, retail investing occurs largely through employer-provided 401(k) plans in which the employer provides a menu of mutual fund options, and retail investors select among the choices provided in that menu.

Because of the fiduciary obligations

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210 See SEC Staff Report, supra note 89, at 7-8 (observing that, after Robinhood’s policies of allowing investors to trade with no account minimums or commissions received “considerable attention,” other brokers began to adopt similar policies).

211 See Game Stopped? Part I, supra note 8, at 110 (written testimony of Jennifer Schulp, Director, Financial Regulation Studies, Cato Institute) (noting rise in retail investors and research showing that “the ability to invest with a small amount of money was a commonly cited reason for opening an account for the first time in 2020”).


213 See Fisch, The Empty Voting Problem, supra note 1, at 83 (terming this practice “empty voting”).

214 See Irina Ivanova, Stock Market’s Fall Has Wiped Out $3 Trillion in Retirement Savings This Year, CBS News: MoneyWatch (June 17, 2022, 8:00 AM), https://www.cbsnews.com/news/stocks-drop-recession-retirement-savings-401k-ira-3-
imposed on employers by the Employee Retirement Income Security Act ("ERISA"), these choices typically involve highly diversified funds with a large number of portfolio securities.215 As a result, the connection between retail investors and the specific companies in which their money is invested is highly attenuated. ERISA also authorizes employers to cause plan participants to invest into a default investment option if they do not make an affirmative investment choice,216 and approximately 50% of plan assets are invested in the default option, meaning that a substantial number of retail investors may not even fully appreciate how their money is being invested.217

In contrast, low-cost, app-based trading facilitates direct stock ownership by retail investors. In addition to potentially reducing the investment costs associated with intermediation, such as advisory fees and taxes,218 direct ownership is likely to engage young retail investors. Simply put, app-based platforms make investing easier and more fun. They also give investors the opportunity to purchase companies that they are familiar with and that affect the world around them.219 As one commentator puts it, “millennials aren’t interested in owning boring bonds. This is a generation of stock pickers.”220 It is fair to believe that the enhanced opportunity for direct investing explains, in part, why millennials “piled into stocks like never before in 2020.”221 In addition, although

215 See Fisch, Securities Intermediaries, supra note 1, at 1984 (explaining “employers must offer their employees a range of diversified investment options” to qualify for ERISA’s liability exemption for investment losses).
217 See id.
218 Investors in mutual funds, for example, may pay taxes every year on the gains they realize in such funds, even if they do not take any distributions. See, e.g., Roger Young, End-of-Year Tax Considerations for Capital Gains: Understanding Mutual Fund Distributions, T. Rowe Price (Aug. 23, 2022), https://www.troweprice.com/personal-investing/resources/insights/understanding-capital-gains-and-taxes-on-mutual-funds.html [https://perma.cc/XE2K-ACG2]. In some cases, the fund may be managed in a way that exacerbates the tax consequences for small investors. See Jason Zwieg, Vanguard Forgets the Little Guy, WALL ST. J., Jan. 22, 2022, at B5 (explaining how fund trading decisions resulted in unexpectedly large tax bills for retail investors).
220 Id.
221 Id.
meme stocks may initially draw new investors into the market, studies suggest that most go on to diversify their portfolios.222

These developments have contributed to a substantial shift in capital market participation. Research by FINRA and the National Opinion Research Center (“NORC”) at the University of Chicago found that investors who opened accounts for the first time in 2020 were younger, had lower incomes, and were more diverse than traditional investors.223 FINRA also found that these new accounts were smaller in size, suggesting that the increased participation reflected a more equitable approach to stock market participation.224 For Black investors in particular, GameStop and Robinhood have led, according to one survey, to “63% of Black Americans under 40 . . . participating in the stock market, the same share as white Americans” and a higher share than at any time in history.225 Robinhood has also released research showing a dramatic increase in Latinx investors’ participation in the capital markets.226 As detailed below, this democratization of the shareholder class has important implications not just for investor wealth but for its impact on corporate America.

B. GameStop and Citizen-Capitalism

The increase in direct retail ownership has the potential to change the relationship between ordinary citizens and corporations. Almost a century ago, Louis Kelso, a political economist, identified the value in what he termed citizen-capitalism, the connection between ordinary citizens and businesses that could be achieved by making citizens into investors.227 Kelso believed that

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225 Freyman, supra note 212.


227 See Louis O. Kelso & Mortimer J. Adler, The Capitalist Manifesto 40, 99 (1958) (“Just as the status of citizenship conferred upon all has achieved political democracy, so the individual and private ownership of capital by all households would achieve economic democracy.”). Kelso was not the only person to advocate this approach. See, e.g., Joseph R.
facilitating the acquisition of capital by ordinary citizens—workers and consumers—would allow those citizens a greater share in the gains generated by the increasing productivity of that capital.\textsuperscript{228}

Kelso invented the Employee Stock Ownership Plan (or “ESOP”).\textsuperscript{229} One key benefit to employee stock ownership, in Kelso’s view, was that broader capital ownership could reduce the gap between the rich and the poor by enabling ordinary citizens to own a meaningful share in the growth of the economy.\textsuperscript{230} The ESOP would increase the motivation of employees to make the company successful, because those efforts would redound to their benefit as stockholders.\textsuperscript{231} Finally, employee stock ownership would unite the interests of management, employees, public stockholders and consumers.\textsuperscript{232}

Kelso discussed General Motors as an example of how ESOPs could facilitate the connection between employees and the companies for which they work.\textsuperscript{233} He highlighted the potential for using an ESOP to fuel corporate growth, which could then be shared with the employees through employee-owned stock. As Kelso explained, the ESOP would give workers “the ability to buy capital and pay for it out of what that capital produces, thus raising employees’ incomes without raising the employer’s labor costs.”\textsuperscript{234} In addition to incentivizing

\textbf{Blasi, Richard B., Freeman & Douglas L. Kruse, The Citizen’s Share: Putting Ownership Back into Democracy} 10 (2013) (arguing that allowing workers to share ownership and profits is way to restore middle class).


\textsuperscript{230} See Kelso & Kelso, \textit{supra} note 228.

\textsuperscript{231} \textit{Id.} (arguing ESOP would “powerfully motivate[ ] employees “to make GM (‘their company’) succeed in international and domestic competition”).

\textsuperscript{232} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{233} Kelso & Kelso, \textit{supra} note 228.

\textsuperscript{234} \textit{Id.}
worker productivity, the ESOP would increase employee voice through their participation as shareholders. Kelso’s writings influenced Congress to include ESOPs in ERISA in 1974. Although ESOPs have been controversial, a variety of studies demonstrate correlations between ESOPs and corporate profitability.

Significantly, ESOPs increase a company’s ownership by ordinary employees as opposed to either a wealthy investor class or institutional intermediaries. This change in ownership can affect a company in several ways. As Brett McDonnell has observed in connection with the standard ESOP: “First, differences in ownership may change the objectives we can expect companies to pursue. Second, different ownership and control structures may affect the incentives and motivation of individual employees. Third, employee ownership and control may affect what information companies are able to use in making decisions.”

The downside of ESOPs is that they may cause worker-participants to be under-diversified as investors. A host of employees suffered substantial losses when the stock of their employers fell precipitously, whether due to economic events or fraud. As Judge Posner observed, “[t]he time may have come to rethink the concept of an ESOP, a seemingly inefficient method of wealth accumulation by employees because of the under-diversification to which it conduces.”

The benefits that Kelso identified of citizen capitalism—providing ordinary citizens with a stake in the success of business operations, giving them a say in business decisions as corporate shareholders, and providing a communication mechanism between management and shareholders, employees, customers and other stakeholders—are not limited to the ESOP, however. The same benefits

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235 Id.
237 See, e.g., Jedidiah J. Kroncke, ESOPs and the Limits of Fractionalized Ownership, 2017 U. CHI. LEGAL F. 287, 300-01 (discussing literature on ESOP company profitability, including studies that show “two to three percent increases in ESOP profitability relative to their corporate cohort”).
239 See David Millon, Enron and the Dark Side of Worker Ownership, 1 SEATTLE J. SOC. JUST. 113, 118 (2002) (“When Enron’s stock price collapsed—falling from a high of nearly $90 per share in 2000 to its current price of about $.25—employees lost up to 99% of the value of their retirement accounts.”).
241 Lynn Stout, Sergio Alberto Gramitto Ricci, and Tamara Belinfanti offer a somewhat different view of citizen capitalism in their influential book. See LYNN STOUT, SERGIO GRAMITTO & TAMARA BELINFANTI, CITIZEN CAPITALISM: HOW A UNIVERSAL FUND CAN PROVIDE INFLUENCE AND INCOME TO ALL 25 (2019). As with the ESOP, Stout, Gramitto Ricci,
can be realized through direct stock market participation. Direct ownership does not come with the baggage of the undiversified ESOP, in which a citizen’s stake is primarily tied to a single business, particularly a business in which that citizen’s human capital is also invested. Moreover, direct ownership similarly heightens the financial partnership between corporations and the stakeholders with whom the corporation deals, giving those stakeholders an interest in the corporation’s success. The New York Stock Exchange and a number of brokerage firms recognized the potential value of this partnership in the mid-1900’s and mounted a publicity campaign to encourage stock ownership by ordinary investors, terming it a “people’s capitalism.”

By including a greater percentage of ordinary people as owners of capital, citizen capitalism can reduce the economic inequality that can otherwise result from capitalist forces, providing a response to Thomas Piketty’s famous criticism of capitalism. Inclusive capitalism can be understood as providing benefits to individuals by increasing their access to societal wealth and, in particular, the wealth gains produced by corporations. Inclusive capitalism can also increase societal stability by reducing wealth and income inequality.

Citizen capitalism may also enhance the voice of ordinary citizens in corporate decisions. Corporate law vests the board of directors with the ultimate responsibility for determining the direction of a corporation. Shareholders play a role in corporate operations by electing that board. They play an

and Belinfanti posit an intermediated form of ownership. As this Article explains below, direct ownership adds engagement and accountability to the economic participation offered by Stout, Gramitto Ricci, and Belinfanti’s proposed universal fund.


246 See, e.g., DEL. CODE ANN. tit. 8, § 141(a) (West 2022) (“The business and affairs of every corporation organized under this chapter shall be managed by or under the direction of a board of directors.”).

247 See, e.g., id. § 211(b).
indirect role through capital market discipline—allocating money to those companies whose business plans the market views as desirable. In addition, shareholders can raise issues of concern and highlight problematic corporate practices, including corporate governance, ESG issues, and operational decisions, through the shareholder proposal rule.248 The power of shareholder action continues to increase. For example, tiny hedge fund Engine No. 1 dramatically spotlighted Exxon’s refusal to address climate change through its successful 2021 proxy contest.249 Weeks later, Exxon announced its plan to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emission by 2050.250 A recent study reports that the first three years of the Big Three’s campaign to increase gender diversity on corporate boards led to a “76% increase in the net flow of new female board members and an 11% increase in the overall proportion of female directors.”251

Although recent examples of shareholder power focus on institutional investors, shareholder power is not limited to institutions; retail investors can also play a critical role. Due to the conservatism of institutional investors, retail investors generate the majority of shareholder proposals and are typically the source of most innovation in such proposals. For the proposals to impact corporate behavior, however, they must ultimately command the support of institutions as well. Similarly, in issuers with significant retail ownership, the retail vote can influence the outcome of critical shareholder votes. DuPont’s ability to earn the support of its retail shareholders was pivotal, for example, in its ability to ward off an activist challenge by hedge fund Trian.252

The GameStop frenzy has expanded retail influence. Retail investors in GameStop, AMC, and other meme stocks demonstrated an unprecedented power to influence capital market pricing even in direct opposition to efforts by institutional investors such as hedge funds. The virtual shareholder meetings

249 See Matt Phillips, How a Tiny Green Fund Turned the Exxon Tanker, N.Y. TIMES, June 11, 2021, at B3 (reporting Engine No. 1 “successfully waged a battle to install three directors on the board of Exxon with the goal of pushing the energy giant to reduce its carbon footprint”).
252 Jeff Mordock, Retail Shareholders Cited as Key to DuPont’s Victory, DEL. ONLINE (May 13, 2015, 8:06 PM), https://www.delawareonline.com/story/money/business/2015/05/13/trian-rebuffed-dupont-slate-wins-seats/27226613/ (“Peltz and DuPont CEO Ellen Kullman cited retail investors . . . for turning the election in favor of the company’s director slate.”).
resulting from the pandemic lockdown provide a more accessible forum in which shareholders can participate in a dialogue with issuer management. Some brokers such as Robinhood have developed mechanisms to facilitate the submission of retail shareholders’ questions at such meetings. Sergio Ricci and Christina Sautter argue that the actions of retail investors at issuers like GameStop and AMC demonstrate retail investors’ ability to use new technology such as social media to overcome traditional collective action problems. Ricci and Sautter predict that this will cause retail investors to engage not just with stock trading but with corporate governance.

Significantly, retail participation in corporate governance offers a new tool for ordinary citizens to hold corporations accountable for their actions. As Joseph Blasi, Richard Freeman, and Douglas Kruse observed in 2013, “the public has grown increasingly critical of corporations and suspicious of the relationship between big government and the big corporate sector.” In 2018, “[a] majority of Americans [viewed] large businesses as self-serving and self-dealing.” Both Democrats and Republicans increasingly believe that corporations wield too much power. Data from interactive investors show that retail shareholders’ efforts to use their voting power to increase corporate accountability have grown dramatically.

See, e.g., Lewis Braham, Robinhood’s New Proxy Platform Battles Investor Apathy, BARRON’s, Oct. 25, 2021, at 27 (describing Robinhood’s acquisition of Say Technology to create platform enabling individual shareholders to ask questions of corporate management).


Greater disclosure subjects those practices to greater scrutiny but not just by shareholders but by regulators, other stakeholders, and society at large. Ricci and Sautter argue that retail engagement has the potential to reduce corporate externalities and cause issuers to embrace a broader public interest, an idea that will be explored in more detail below. At the same time, however, citizen capitalism can also reshape ordinary citizens’ views of the corporate sector, altering their preferences on how corporations are regulated.

These developments have led issuers to pay growing attention to identifying the concerns of their retail shareholders and addressing those concerns. Following the outcome at DuPont, both Procter & Gamble and activist hedge fund Trian paid substantial attention to cultivating the votes of retail investors, and those investors were ultimately pivotal in Trian’s victory. AMC CEO Adam Aron began using Twitter and Reddit to communicate with the company’s retail shareholders, engaging in an unprecedented level of transparency in which Aron sought the views of his shareholder base on issues ranging from whether AMC should accept cryptocurrency to executives cashing in their stock options.

Aron also shifted the focus of the company’s traditional quarter earnings calls to addressing the concerns of retail investors. Investor relations accountability-on-human-rights/ (recounting how retail investor used shareholder proposal process to push for human rights improvements at ExxonMobil).


Gramitto Ricci & Sautter, supra note 254, at 94 (describing how increased retail engagement leads to wider disbursement of shares and, ultimately, internalization of corporate externalities).

See infra Section IV.D.

For evidence that the transformation of workers into investors leads them to oppose more stringent regulatory policies, see Stefano Pagliari, Lauren M. Phillips & Kevin L. Young, The Financialization of Policy Preferences: Financial Asset Ownership, Regulation and Crisis Management, 18 Socio-Econ. Rev. 655, 674 (2020) (“[O]wnership of financial assets is associated with lower levels of support for more stringent regulatory policies targeting the financial industry.”).


Id. (“AMC quarterly earnings calls, which used to cater to Wall Street research analysts, now revolve around retail investors and their ideas for the company, which involve questions about crypto, NFTs, AMC merch, eSports, and more.”).
specialists are counseling issuers not just to pay attention to retail investors but to develop strategies for doing so, including taking advantage of the company’s website and making greater use of social media. And corporate executives are using new tools to connect with retail investors and respond to their concerns.

Direct investment is necessary, however, for retail shareholders to play an effective role in influencing corporate behavior. Critically, capital ownership is not enough. Shareholders who own equity through intermediated investments such as mutual funds do not have the right to participate in corporate governance. They do not have the authority to introduce shareholder proposals. They do not even have the right to vote the shares reflecting their proportionate ownership interest in the portfolio companies held by the fund.

In addition to depriving investors of say in their portfolio companies, intermediation deprives investors of engagement. There is little reason for investors to pay attention to the 500 or 2000 portfolio companies held by their diversified index funds. Not only do investors have no connection to the choice to invest in those companies, but intermediation and diversification sever the connection between the investors’ financial returns and individual firm behavior. Moreover, as detailed in the next Section, there are reasons to question whether the interests of institutional investors and the issues on which they chose to engage are representative of retail investors’ interests.

C. GameStop and Intermediation

A key advantage of direct retail ownership is that it restores shareholder influence over corporate decisions to those who have an economic interest in those decisions. The growth of intermediated investing has resulted in a relatively small number of institutional investors exercising a substantial amount of control over corporate decisions. John Coates identified this concern, warning that “control of most public companies—that is, the wealthiest organizations in the world, with more revenue than most states—will soon be concentrated in the

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269 See, e.g., Nina Trentmann, Firms Try Relating to Small Investors, WALL ST. J., Feb. 8, 2022, at B1 (“Executives are turning to new methods, such as tools that analyze reams of data and social-media platforms, to determine just who their small investors are and how to reach them, while also using traditional approaches like shareholder letters and meetings.”).

270 This is where direct ownership provides a form of citizen capitalism that extends beyond Stout, Gramitto, and Belinfanti’s universal fund proposal. See Stout, Gramitto Ricci & Belinfanti, supra note 241, at 49-50 (proposing citizen capitalism through universal fund through which all citizens can share in economic proceeds from capitalism).


272 Id.
hands of a dozen or fewer people.” Coates warned that a small number of people, through their control over the voting power in the portfolio companies held by index funds in particular, could wield “unsurpassed power” over corporate America.

A particular area of concern involves the possibility that institutional investors will use this power to the detriment of other societal interests. The common ownership literature, for example, warns of the possible anticompetitive effects when large institutions own substantial stakes in competing firms, and offers empirical evidence in support of such effects. The empirical findings have led regulators to initiate inquiries into these concerns. In response, some commentators have sought to limit the size or holdings of large mutual funds.

One man in particular, BlackRock’s Larry Fink, was described in 2010 “as possibly the most important man in finance today.” Since 2010, Fink’s influence has only increased. His annual letters to CEOs instruct corporate America with respect to issues ranging from ESG to whether corporations should get involved in voting rights legislation, and empirical research indicates that corporations respond to Fink’s instructions. That responsiveness likely results from the fact that Fink’s instructions are backed by BlackRock’s substantial voting power and its ability to vote against director candidates or CEO compensation packages if Fink is displeased with management’s actions.

Coates recognized but did not highlight that the people who make decisions on behalf of the large institutional investors do not themselves hold the economic stakes in the companies that they control but instead exercise that power on

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273 Coates, supra note 12, at 2.
274 Id. at 3.
277 See, e.g., Eric A. Posner, Fiona M. Scott Morton & E. Glen Weyl, A Proposal to Limit the Anticompetitive Power of Institutional Investors, 81 ANTITRUST L.J. 669, 670 (2017) (proposing that institutional investors be limited “to a stake of no more than 1 percent in more than a single firm in oligopolies”).
behal of dispersed individual fund shareholders. I have described this exercise of shareholder power by asset managers as empty voting and argued that it has the potential to create agency costs because the interests of those who control fund voting decisions may not be aligned with the interests of the beneficiaries of those funds.

A growing number of commentators have expressed concern over empty voting and the agency problems it creates. As former acting SEC chair Allison Lee observed, mutual funds may not always reflect the preferences of their investors when they vote their proxies, and “[a]ddressing this agency cost is at the heart of corporate governance today.” The commentary identifies a variety of reasons why the interests of institutional intermediaries may differ from those of retail investors. These reasons include the business interests of the institutions such as enabling them to secure revenues from the administration of or inclusion in 401(k) plans, the personal views or political aspirations of fund managers, and a fear of regulation or public retribution in response to the

281 Coates, supra note 12, at 5 (finding public individuals remained dominant source of capital “even if their investments were increasingly held by institutional investors”).

282 See Fisch, The Empty Voting Problem, supra note 1.


285 This discussion focuses on the divergence of interests related to funds’ participation in the governance of their portfolio companies. The mutual fund structure itself creates a distinct set of conflicts and agency costs. See, e.g., Paul G. Mahoney, Manager- Investor Conflicts in Mutual Funds, 18 J. ECON. PERSPS. 161, 164 (2004) (describing conflicts resulting from funds’ compensation structures).

286 See Griffith & Lund, supra note 283, at 1176 (terming these “corporate client” conflicts).

287 Mahoney & Mahoney, supra note 283, at 866 (stating that fund managers’ personal views might explain predictable voting of money managers on shareholder proposals for social and environmental issues).

asset managers’ size and power.\textsuperscript{289} Although empirical evidence on retail voting is limited, it supports these concerns—retail investors vote differently from institutional intermediaries.\textsuperscript{290}

Scholars have identified possible ways to reduce the agency costs resulting from empty voting, including mechanisms to provide mutual fund beneficiaries with the power to influence how asset managers vote their shares.\textsuperscript{291} These mechanisms are subject, however, to a variety of limitations. Most particularly, people who invest indirectly through mutual funds are unlikely to be aware of, and informed about, the portfolio companies owned by those funds. In addition, they are particularly likely to suffer from rational apathy, both because of their relatively small stakes and because they have not made the affirmative decision to invest in the portfolio companies held through their funds.\textsuperscript{292} Indeed, many mutual fund investors have not even made an affirmative decision to invest in the fund itself, because they are automatically invested into the default option in their employer’s 401(k) plan.\textsuperscript{293}

As the preceding sections have detailed, however, when retail investors invest directly, they are far more likely to be informed about the companies in which

\textsuperscript{289} Schwartz, supra note 283, at 1.

\textsuperscript{290} Alon Brav, Matthew Cain & Jonathon Zytnick, Retail Shareholder Participation in the Proxy Process: Monitoring, Engagement, and Voting, 144 J. FIN. ECON. 492, 493 (2021) (documenting “substantial differences” between retail shareholders and institutional investors on various categories of shareholder proposals).

\textsuperscript{291} See, e.g., Jill Fisch, The Uncertain Stewardship Potential of Index Funds, in GLOBAL SHAREHOLDER STEWARDSHIP: COMPLEXITIES, CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES 470 (Dionysia Katelouzou & Dan W. Puchniak eds., Cambridge Univ. Press 2022) (“[A] number of commentators have demanded that [index funds] do more to influence the decisions made at their portfolio companies.”); see also Sharfman, supra note 283, at 28-29 (summarizing several feasible mechanisms by which retail investors could convey their voting preferences to fund managers); Caleb N. Griffin, We Three Kings: Disintermediating Voting at the Index Fund Giants, 79 Md. L. Rev. 954, 983 (2020) (advocating pass-through voting).

\textsuperscript{292} See, e.g., Alicia Adamczyk, Your 401(k) Might Be Invested in Private Prison Companies. Here’s How to Find Out, CNBC: MAKE IT (Aug. 12, 2020, 3:29 PM), https://www.cnbc.com/2020/09/12/new-tool-tells-you-if-your-401k-is-invested-in-private-prisons.html [https://perma.cc/DAL8-DSA2] (quoting Andrew Behar, CEO of As You Sow, as saying that many people are unaware that they are invested through their 401(k) plan “in companies that don’t align with their values”).

\textsuperscript{293} The assets of plan participants who are automatically enrolled in a 401(k) plan as well as those who have not selected another investment option are invested in the default investment option designated by the employer. Most 401k plans use target date funds as the default option. Stephen Miller, Number of 401(k) Funds Offered to Plan Participants Shrinks, SHRM (Dec. 1, 2020), https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/benefits/pages/number-of-401k-funds-offered-to-plan-participants-shrinks.aspx [https://perma.cc/CR2M-LX8C] (reporting data from Fidelity that 92% of 401(k) plans use target date funds as default option, and that among Millennials, 69% are “invested exclusively in target-date fund, due in part to being automatically enrolled in their 401(k) and defaulted into the option”). Although a variety of demographic factors affect whether plan participants are likely to select the default option, studies suggest that most participants and assets remain in the default option. Blanched & Bruns, supra note 216, at 1.
they invest. Early evidence since the GameStop frenzy suggests that this engagement is extending to participation in corporate governance as well. Reducing the extent to which retail investment is intermediated by increasing direct capital market participation by retail investors thus offers another potential vehicle for reducing both the power of institutional intermediaries and the agency costs resulting from intermediation.

D. GameStop and the Stakeholder Debate

The reemergence of the retail investor has particularly significant implications for the debate over stakeholder governance. Stakeholder governance shifts the objective of the corporation from maximizing shareholder economic value to delivering value to a variety of stakeholders, including employees, customers, suppliers, communities, and the environment. At its core, stakeholder governance is about using corporate governance to achieve societal objectives that cannot be addressed adequately through regulation.

The debate over stakeholder governance has been extensive. A threshold question is whether stakeholder governance is an instrumental tool to enhance shareholder value or an alternative objective that can or should be pursued even when it is in tension with shareholder value. From a legal perspective, commentators debate whether corporate managers can pursue stakeholder value without violating their fiduciary duties to shareholders. From a practical perspective, stakeholder governance requires corporate decisionmakers to decide which stakeholders’ interests should be considered and how competing interests should be prioritized.

A critical question is who decides whether a corporation should adopt stakeholder governance and to what degree. Do a corporation’s managers or the board of directors have the authority to embrace stakeholder governance, or

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294 See supra notes 265-69 and accompanying text (discussing companies’ information campaigns and outreach to retail investors).

295 See, e.g., supra note 252 and accompanying text (describing retail investors’ role in defeating hedge fund Trian in DuPont proxy contest).


297 See, e.g., Edward B. Rock, For Whom Is the Corporation Managed in 2020? The Debate over Corporate Purpose, 76 BUS. LAW. 363, 367 (2021) (explaining renewed debate over stakeholderism and corporate purpose as response to “the political polarization of our electoral politics [that] has resulted in legislative deadlock”).

298 In 2019, the Business Roundtable, a membership organization of chief executive officers, embraced stakeholder governance through its adoption of a “revised” statement of corporate purpose. Business Roundtable Redefines the Purpose of a Corporation to Promote “An Economy That Serves All Americans,” BUS. ROUNDTABLE (Aug. 19, 2019), https://www.businessroundtable.org/business-roundtable-redefines-the-purpose-of-a-corporation-to-promote-an-economy-that-serves-all-americans [https://perma.cc/U7A3-EX37]. Although some commentators have viewed that statement as a commitment by the employers of the signatories to the statement, as Bebchuk and Tallarita acknowledge, the
boards of those companies did not appear to play a role in the CEOs’ decisions to sign it. Bebchuk & Tallarita, supra note 296, at 130-31 (finding that out of forty-eight companies contacted, forty-seven responded that decision to endorse Business Roundtable statement was approved by only the CEO and not the board).


300 See Mahoney & Mahoney, supra note 283, at 843 (arguing that institutions cannot sacrifice shareholder value for stakeholder values consistent with their fiduciary duties).

301 Oliver Hart and Luigi Zingales argue that corporate managers have the legal authority to respect shareholders’ noneconomic preferences. See Oliver Hart & Luigi Zingales, Companies Should Maximize Shareholder Welfare Not Market Value, 2 J.L. Fin. & Acct. 247, 263 (2017). Hart and Zingales do not, however, consider the agency problem discussed above resulting from the intermediation of most shares. See id. Ironically, at least one study has found that public pension funds, which might be viewed as natural advocates of employee interests, do not appear to function as “effective instruments of worker power in the aggregate” through their ownership of publicly traded companies. Larry Liu & Adam Goldstein, Labor’s Capital and Worker Well-Being: Do US Pension Funds Benefit Labor Interests?, 100 SOC. FORCES 1080, 1083 (2022) (concluding pension funds do not encourage “labor-friendly behaviors” and that this trend has not shifted since the early 2000s).

market mechanisms allow shareholders with different preferences to influence corporations. Shareholders can choose which companies to invest in. They can avoid companies whose policies they disagree with, or they can invest in those companies and push their fellow shareholders to support change. Finally, everyone does not have to agree. Unlike the institutional model of stakeholder governance which seeks to impose a one-size-fits all level of social policy on all businesses, direct ownership allows for variation among firms and practices.

To be fair, retail shareholders do not perfectly represent stakeholder interests. Roughly half of U.S. citizens are not invested in the markets at all, and even after the GameStop frenzy, those who invest are disproportionately white, wealthy, and male. Shareholder votes are based on economic ownership, meaning that large shareholders have greater voice. Despite these concerns, a shareholder need not hold a substantial stake to influence corporate decisions. The shareholder proposal rule, SEC Rule 14a-8, enables shareholders with relatively small stakes to introduce shareholder proposals, thereby putting issues of concern on the corporate agenda. Social media tools such as Reddit reduce the costs of publicizing a proposal and mobilizing support.

Historically, a substantial proportion of shareholder proposals have addressed social policy issues and reflected stakeholder concerns. Toward this end, they have been remarkably effective. Recent shareholder proposals have focused on a variety of stakeholder concerns from workplace diversity and sexual harassment policies to food and product safety. The 2020-2021 proxy season saw retail investors sponsor new proposals at multiple companies seeking to have them convert to public benefit corporations in order to commit to stakeholder governance. Moreover, because many proposals seek to have corporations provide greater disclosure of the negative externalities they impose on stakeholders, they can have broader effects—increasing the transparency of

303 See supra note 170 and accompanying text.
306 See Gramitto Ricci & Sautter, supra note 254.
308 See Neel Rane, Comment, Twenty Years of Shareholder Proposals After Cracker Barrel: An Effective Tool for Implementing LGBT Employment Protections, 162 U. Pa. L. Rev. 929, 932 (2014) (“[S]hareholder proposals have been an extremely effective tool for activists and interested shareholders to effect employment protections for LGBT employees.”).
309 See generally Fisch, supra note 299 (describing these purpose proposals).
corporate behavior and energizing stakeholders, regulators, or the public at large to take action. Stakeholders can access this mechanism for focusing greater attention on their interests through the simple process of buying stock. Indeed, corporate law has a long history of stakeholders becoming shareholders and then using the corporate machinery in an effort to change the corporation’s behavior. Harwell Wells details how two retail shareholders in the 1940s attempted to use the shareholder proposal rule to persuade Greyhound to eliminate its racially segregated buses. In 2022, Amazon employee Daniel Olayiwola purchased stock in Amazon and, at the 2022 shareholder meeting, introduced a shareholder proposal seeking better treatment for Amazon workers.

These efforts have been facilitated by the SEC staff, which in 2021 announced a change to its interpretation of Rule 14a-8 that opens the door to a more expansive use of shareholder proposals to address stakeholder interests. Finally, the prospect that retail shareholders will reflect stakeholder interests in their engagement with the corporations in which they invest is not mere speculation; there is increasing evidence that retail investors care about stakeholder considerations. One recent survey reported that “more than half (51%) of retail investors avoid investing in certain stocks due to moral or ethical concerns about a company’s business pursuits.”

For millennials and Gen-Zers, social justice issues—including climate change, racial justice, and inequality—are increasingly important. Millennial investors—those who entered the market in the greatest numbers as part of the GameStop frenzy—are “the driving force in the adoption of socially responsible investment

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310 Madison Condon details the use of shareholder proposals to address climate externalities, although her examples focus on proposals introduced by institutional investors. See Madison Condon, Externalities and the Common Owner, 95 WASH. L. REV. 1, 21-26 (2020).


312 Lauren Rosenblatt, Stock-Owning Amazon Employee, SEATTLE TIMES, May 6, 2022, at A11.


strategies.” As Barzuza, Curtis, and Webber explain, millennial investors increasingly see a connection between investment activity and achieving broader societal goals, and they are calling for the companies in which they invest to give greater consideration to stakeholder interests. Although the extent to which citizens will pursue stakeholder or societal goals in their role as investors remains unclear, as Ricci and Sautter explain, “[c]itizens who hold a small economic interest in a corporation would likely prioritize their interests as human beings living in a society and on a shared planet when voting their shares.”

V. SOME CAUTIONARY CONSIDERATIONS

The preceding Part has identified the benefits that the reemergence of the retail investor can provide to corporations, the capital markets, and investors themselves. These benefits should not be overstated. There are costs of increased direct retail ownership. Investors will make mistakes such as excessive trading, following the herd, inadequate diversification, and the use of financial products that they do not understand. Even if investors learn from their mistakes, some will lose money, perhaps more than they can afford to lose. Retail investors will affect the capital markets, and other market participants will have to adjust. New information sources will evolve and raise new opportunities for manipulation and fraud.

For the reasons described above, this Article does not view the costs as sufficient to warrant regulatory intervention motivated by paternalism. A more difficult question is whether the retail investor mistakes will prevent issuers and the market from benefiting from citizen capitalism. Although at present this question is largely unanswerable, there are a few issues that warrant particular attention.

A. Social Media as a Source of Investment Information

The first issue is whether retail investing is sufficiently informed to confer the benefits described in this Article. Retail investors who purchase stock as a social movement or to be part of the crowd need not be interested in the corporation that issues the stock or engaged in its underlying business. Such investors are unlikely to make informed trades, vote their shares, or seek to hold managers accountable. In a sense, the governance role of frenzied retail investors might be closely analogous to that of algorithmic traders—that is, nonexistent.

316 Michal Barzuza, Quinn Curtis & David H. Webber, Shareholder Value(s): Index Fund ESG Activism and the New Millennial Corporate Governance, 93 S. CAL. L. REV. 1243, 1294 (2020).
317 Id. at 1285.
318 Gramitto Ricci & Sautter, supra note 254.
This position is likely exaggerated; empirical evidence to date suggests that a substantial proportion of retail trading is informed and that retail investors are increasingly engaging with the companies in which they invest.\footnote{See supra notes 265-69 and accompanying text; infra notes 334-36 and accompanying text.} Retail investors rely, however, on nontraditional sources of information. In particular, retail investors appear to be heavily influenced by postings on social media sites.\footnote{See, e.g., SEC STAFF REPORT, supra note 89, at 17 ("The price and volume movements in GME coincided with substantial interest expressed in certain online forums devoted to investing, including YouTube channels and the subreddit WallStreetBets."); Betzer & Harries, supra note 135 (showing empirically that "an increase in Reddit posts on GameStop is followed by an increase in the ratio of retail trading proportion of GameStop").} One study reported that a third of young investors rely on social media for investment advice.\footnote{Emily Graffeo, A Third of Young Traders Go to Social Media for Investment Advice—And 12% Say They Invest Because It “Feels Like a Game”. Survey Finds, INSIDER: MKTS. INSIDER (Aug. 23, 2021, 10:30 AM), https://markets.businessinsider.com/news/stocks/retail-investing-trends-robinhood-gamification-survey-social-media-trading-2021-8 [https://perma.cc/K6R3-QFJY].} The European Securities and Markets Authority warned investors to “be careful when taking investment decisions based exclusively on information from social media and other unregulated online platforms, if they cannot verify the reliability and quality of that information.”\footnote{EUROPEAN SEC. & MKTS. AUTH., EPISODES OF VERY HIGH VOLATILITY IN TRADING OF CERTAIN STOCKS 1 (2021), https://www.esma.europa.eu/sites/default/files/library/esma70-155-11809_episodes_of_very_high_volatility_in_trading_of_certain_stocks_0.pdf [https://perma.cc/WJB6-926R].}

To be sure, social media presents an ever-growing danger of misinformation and disinformation that can manipulate the behavior of users—a danger that extends well beyond the capital markets.\footnote{Thomas Lewton & Alice McCool, Greenwashing on Facebook: How the World’s Biggest Polluters Use Social Media to Obfuscate on Climate Change, TIME (Nov. 3, 2021, 10:23 AM), https://time.com/6113396/greenwashing-on-facebook (reporting data compiled by Eco-Bot.Net revealing broad-based Facebook disinformation campaign by “the world’s most polluting companies”).} A collaborative study explored the role of social media in spreading both misinformation and mistrust in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic.\footnote{INGRID VOLKMER, UNIV. OF MELBOURNE, SOCIAL MEDIA AND COVID-19: A GLOBAL STUDY OF DIGITAL CRISIS INTERACTION AMONG GEN Z AND MILLENNIALS (2021), https://arts.animelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/3958684/Volkmer-Social-Media-and-COVID.pdf [https://perma.cc/23V2-7JGW].} Commentators have highlighted the role that social media platforms played in the January 6, 2021, Capitol insurrection\footnote{See, e.g., Tonya Mosley & Allison Hagan, How Social Media Fueled the Insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, WBUR (Jan. 7, 2021), https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2021/01/07/social-media-capitol-mob [https://perma.cc/G9JE-VFML] (“Technology platforms make sensational, attention-grabbing content more visible through what’s called maximizing user engagement.”).} and debated Facebook’s use of algorithms to promote posts that are likely to
generate outrage or other strong reactions. Social media provides users with the potential to reach a greater audience than other communication mediums, and to do so with limited accountability. The ability to post anonymously has been cited as creating the potential for lack of civility and other undesirable behaviors. With respect to investing information, anonymous posting heightens the risk of fraud.

On the other hand, efforts to manipulate the market through online communications are not new. Traditional sources of investment information have proven similarly unreliable, and even professional investors are subject to manipulation and cognitive biases. Perhaps most importantly, investors seem aware of the risks associated with the lack of accountability on social media. One empirical study found that investors rely less on information that is posted anonymously, and that such posts have limited price effects. Another study suggests that social media users respond most to posts by people who

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331 For example, a student comment details the widespread use of the internet in the 1990s, including on-line chat rooms and discussion forums, to perpetrate securities fraud and manipulation. Nancy Toross, Comment, *Double-Click on This: Keeping Pace with On-line Market Manipulation*, 32 LOY. L.A. L. REV. 1399, 1417-29 (1999).


develop a reputation for credibility.\textsuperscript{335} Research also suggests that the analyst postings on social media are informative and that investors can trade profitably on those beliefs.\textsuperscript{336} Although there is substantial heterogeneity in the quality of postings, investors have some ability to identify the high quality sources of information.\textsuperscript{337} Similarly, it appears that issuers may benefit from social media as a source of information, gaining the ability, in some cases, to improve their operations as a result of the “collective wisdom of the Reddit chatroom.”\textsuperscript{338}

Although empirical studies of the GameStop frenzy are ongoing, early results do not indicate social media is distinctively problematic as an information source; rather, investor use of these sources is consistent with their overall reliance on online sources of information, including Twitter, Reddit, TikTok, and more. The likely message from the GameStop frenzy is that the SEC, like other regulators, must pay continued attention to the use of social media platforms. Social media use by securities professionals, corporate officials, and people who are trading the securities about which they post warrants particular oversight. Notably, issuers are increasingly using social media to communicate with their investors and to combat misinformation.\textsuperscript{339} The SEC might follow their lead and consider engaging directly with social media to monitor ongoing developments, play a role in educating investors about how to determine the reliability of posts, and even flag posts that are particularly suspect. These developments also warrant consideration of greater collaboration between the SEC and other regulators that are confronting the challenges presented by social media platforms, such as the Federal Trade Commission and the Federal Communications Commission.\textsuperscript{340}

B. Digital Engagement Practices

A potentially bigger concern is when retail investing is the product of affirmative manipulation. Some commentators have warned that apps nudge investor behavior or seek to make certain stocks or trading activities more

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{335} Michael Farrell, T. Clifton Green, Russell Jame & Stanimir Markov, The Democratization of Investment Research and the Informativeness of Retail Investor Trading, 145 J. FIN. ECON. 616, 616-18 (2022).}


\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{337} Id.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{338} Chiu & Yahya, supra note 195, at 86.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{339} See, e.g., Trentmann, supra note 269 (describing how one issuer “works with an external investor-relations firm that monitors popular online retail trading communities like Stocktwits, and corrects false statements if needed”).}

The Massachusetts enforcement action against Robinhood is premised, in large part, on the allegedly manipulative aspects of its trading platform. The SEC’s request for public input on DEP solicited information on how a variety of digital features, ranging from celebrations for trading such as “digital confetti” to games, leaderboards and curated lists, will influence investor behavior.

While concerns over the ability of app-based platforms to influence investing behavior are undoubtedly valid, the same can be said of most consumer-directed behavior, including product information, credit card offers, and pharmaceutical advertising. Many businesses offer free products to induce consumers to make additional purchases, making it hard to distinguish Robinhood’s free stock from Dunkin’ Donuts’ free coffee. A paternalistic approach that regulates or limits business activity because of its capacity to influence behavior sweeps far more broadly than fintech. Moreover, that the platform provider has a financial motive in encouraging the targeted behavior does not distinguish trading platforms. Credit card companies encourage their customers to borrow, even to the point of incurring excessive debt, so they can make money from the high interest rates they charge on that debt. Pharmaceutical companies hope that people will demand costly prescription drugs from their doctors based on what they see on television.

The power of platforms to gather customer-specific information and then to use that information to exploit vulnerabilities presents a distinct concern. A brokerage app can collect information on a customer’s trading patterns, predict which types of securities the customer is most likely to buy, and target that customer with recommendations for more of those types of securities.

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341 See Darbyshire, supra note 120; see also Game Stopped? Part II, supra note 8, at 9 (written testimony of Alexis Goldstein, Senior Policy Analyst, Americans for Financial Reform) (describing Robinhood as “using targeted advertising on social media”).

342 See supra notes 91-92 and accompanying text.

343 Request for Comment on Digital Engagement Practices, supra note 7, at 49069.


347 See, e.g., Generation Z Are More Conservative Investors than You May Think—Data from Financial Platforms Moomoo and Futubull Shows, YAHOO! FIN. (July 25, 2022),
Similarly, an app can target investors who are likely to use derivatives or purchase securities on margin. This targeting can both generate additional revenues for the broker and enable the broker to target those investors who are receptive to a particular pitch or trading strategy. Although app-based brokers would seem to distance a brokerage firm from the interpersonal interactions that generate this knowledge and may leave a customer unaware that the information is being collected or used, the technology used by a brokerage platform may allow a firm to collect substantial information on customer preferences, trading patterns, and responses to nudges and cues. The platform can then use artificial intelligence to respond to that information. In particular, while an app can use the information to encourage behavior that is in the customer’s best interests, it can also encourage behavior that is inconsistent with its knowledge of the customer for its own financial benefit.

Again, this acquisition and use of customer data is not unique to trading apps. Amazon collects data on its customers and uses those data to generate “predictive suggestions for products and services that each user might be inclined to purchase.” Cambridge Analytica obtained user data from Facebook that it then used to create targeted messages to voters in the 2016 presidential election. Target received negative publicity for collecting information that it used to predict when its customers were pregnant to send them maternity advertisements. The technology used in these examples is powerful, and it may be a matter of algorithmic programming that is not visible in the same way as overt verbal or written actions. As with other artificial intelligence-type tools, platform regulation should ensure that providers are held accountable for the impact of their design features without requiring proof that those features were deliberately designed to exploit or defraud.

Existing broker-dealer regulations limit brokers’ ability to engage in this type of targeting. When brokers make recommendations or provide investment advice to customers, they must adhere to certain legal standards because of their potential influence on customer behavior. Brokers have an obligation to know their customers and to determine that their recommendations are suitable for the

https://perma.cc/8YYT-YHCN (reporting investment patterns based on data digital trading platform Moomoo collected from users).


351 See, e.g., Cary Coglianese & David Lehr, Regulating by Robot: Administrative Decision Making in the Machine-Learning Era, 105 GEO. L.J. 1147, 1149 (2017) (“Many products and services, including email spam filters, medical diagnoses, product marketing, and self-driving cars . . . depend on machine-learning algorithms and their ability to deliver astonishing forecasting power and speed.” (footnotes omitted)).
targeted investors. The SEC adopted Regulation Best Interest (“Reg BI”) in 2019 requiring brokers to comply with a “best interest” standard. Reg BI also limits how brokers can be compensated for their recommendations.

What constitutes a recommendation is not clear. In adopting Reg BI, the SEC stated that the definition is “not susceptible to a bright line test” and depends on the specific “facts and circumstances” of a particular situation. A recommendation need not be explicit; if a digital design or function suggests an investment or strategy, that design may constitute a recommendation. A key issue in the determination of whether Reg BI applies is the degree to which a communication is individually tailored. The SEC explained: “The more individually tailored the communication to a specific customer or a targeted group of customers about a security or group of securities, the greater the likelihood that the communication may be viewed as a ‘recommendation.’”

One of the risks of manipulation lies in the potential for an app-based broker to use customer information to provide targeted recommendations without complying with Reg BI. Indeed, Robinhood has explicitly maintained that it does not use artificial intelligence to recommend securities or investment strategies, implicitly recognizing that, to do so, would warrant regulatory scrutiny concerning its compliance with these legal standards.

Brokers have greater obligations with respect to margin loans and options trading. FINRA rules require brokers affirmatively to approve customer accounts for options trading and, in doing so, to exercise due diligence in

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354 Schadle, supra note 353.

355 Regulation Best Interest, supra note 353, at 33334.

356 See Darbyshire, supra note 120 (explaining that “the SEC is looking at how digital design itself could be construed as giving investment advice”).

357 Regulation Best Interest, supra note 353, at 33335.

358 See Letter from David Dusseault, President, Robinhood Fin., LLC, to Vanessa Countryman, Sec’y, Sec. & Exch. Comm’n (Oct. 1, 2021), https://www.sec.gov/comments/s7-10-21/s71021-9316498-260092.pdf [https://perma.cc/YJ7P-EVSR], at 8-9 (“Robinhood does not recommend securities to particular investors or groups of investors using AI, ML (for example by sending or pushing specific investment recommendations or trade ideas tailored to specific customers), or any other method.”).
determining whether options trading is appropriate for that account. FINRA rules provide that brokers must require customers to meet minimum deposit requirements to open a margin account, limit the extent of leverage associated with such an account in accordance with Regulation T, and maintain minimum margin requirements on an ongoing basis. Brokers are also required to review the need to impose higher margin requirements, if necessary, for individual accounts or securities. The upshot of these rules is to require that brokers oversee the level of risk associated with their customers’ trading activity. Automation should not be used as a tool for evading that oversight function.

C. Financial Literacy

A final concern is that retail investors will be particularly vulnerable to exploitation both by fraudsters on social media and app-based brokerage firms because of their lack of financial literacy. Investor financial literacy is an ongoing challenge. Retail investors lack the basic skills necessary to manage their money, use credit cards, and handle mortgages and retirement savings. Policymakers and researchers have struggled to identify tools for improving financial literacy, but many education and outreach efforts have shown limited success.

One of the challenges with app-based trading is that investors tend to have limited understanding even of the products they are using. FINRA’s survey reported, for example, that a substantial number of investors surveyed did not know whether their investment account charged commissions, whether they had

360 FINRA Rule 4210, supra note 209.
362 See, e.g., JILL E. FISCH, ANDREA HASLER, ANNAMARIA LUSARDI & GARY MOTTOLA, FINRA INVESTOR EDUC. FOUND., NEW EVIDENCE ON THE FINANCIAL KNOWLEDGE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF INVESTORS 2 (2019), https://gflec.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/FINRA_GFLEC_Investor_FinancialIliteracy_Report_FINAL.pdf [https://perma.cc/8NR9-G2SD] (“Data from the 2018 National Financial Capability Study...show that only 30% of the general population demonstrates understanding of basic financial concepts such as the workings of interest rates, inflation, and risk diversification...”).
ever purchased fractional shares, or whether their account allowed them to purchase securities on margin.\textsuperscript{364}

App-based brokers see themselves not as the problem but as the solution. Robinhood explains that many of its “digital features are designed to promote financial literacy and investment awareness,” features that include Robinhood Learn, In-App Education, and Robinhood Snacks.\textsuperscript{365} Webull describes its in-app community platforms as enabling its customers to learn from each other.\textsuperscript{366} As one commentator explains, these platforms that are designed for self-directed investors are increasingly offering “embedded education” tools that provide such investors with direction, research, and analysis to assist the decision-making process.\textsuperscript{367} These tools can dramatically increase the practical accessibility of capital market participation for retail investors.

But fintech can do more. App-based platforms have the capability of providing just-in-time information—information that is provided to an investor at the time the investor enters a trade, seeks a quote on an option, or considers funding a trade through margin lending. Just-in-time information has been shown to improve the effectiveness of financial education because investors have access to the educational material when it is decision-relevant.\textsuperscript{368} Apps could encourage investors to reconsider risky or unusual investment decisions with a pop-up asking “are you sure?” An investor who indicated uncertainty could then be directed to a source of additional information. Apps could use the same features that have been criticized as overly engaging—bright colors, confetti, and easy-to-use designs—to reward customers for accessing educational material or demonstrating their mastery of financial concepts. App-based platforms also have the ability to make financial education interactive. An ongoing challenge with disclosure-based regulation is that, even if regulations mandate valuable disclosures, many investors do not read them. Apps could provide questions or tools that require investors to demonstrate their familiarity


\textsuperscript{365} Dusseault, supra note 358, at 9-10.


with the disclosures before being approved for trading certain types of instruments or increasing their level of risk exposure.\footnote{Stephen Choi suggested that investors could demonstrate sufficient sophistication to be qualified for a higher level of independent trading. See Stephen Choi, \textit{Regulating Investors Not Issuers: A Market-Based Proposal}, 88 CALIF. L. REV. 279, 310-313 (2000).}

Regulators could also “nudge” fintech in this direction. Rather than constraining innovation through new regulations or enforcement actions, regulators could encourage the development of greater educational tools, and perhaps a demonstration that those tools are being used effectively to improve customer financial literacy. Investor education requirements could be imposed as an alternative sanction to fines or license revocations. Demonstrated effectiveness in financial education could also provide brokers with safe harbor protection with respect to requirements such as suitability or Reg BI.

In sum, the GameStop frenzy offers new reasons to think carefully about what motivates retail investing decisions and how to motivate investors to make better ones. By engaging with the tools provided by social media and trading apps, regulators can encourage retail investors to reemerge in the capital markets and serve as a mechanism for constructive change.

\textbf{CONCLUSION}

The GameStop frenzy is very much a product of new developments in the capital markets, particularly the role of fintech and social media. These developments show considerable promise in reducing barriers to retail participation in those markets. The reemergence of the retail investor, moreover, has the promise of affecting not just capital market behavior, but the way public corporations are run.

Whether this promise will be realized remains to be seen and depends in part on developments in retail engagement—not just in trading, but in voting shares. It also depends on the extent to which regulators take action to restrict the innovations that have led to broader market participation. This Article has argued that the rationale for such restrictions is unconvincing and motivated largely by a misplaced skepticism about retail trading. At the same time, this Article identifies potential opportunities for regulators to improve the retail investor experience and to learn from the costs as well as the benefits of retail ownership.