Familiar Strangers: Relating Market System Studies within Marketing Research

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Introduction
Markets and marketing are two intimately related concepts. And yet, not long ago, it seemed that the market had all but retreated from marketing thought, as marketing scholars had stopped treating the market as a phenomenon in itself worth of analytical attention, instead relegating it to the role of backcloth. Puzzled by this peculiar development, marketing scholars of diverse disciplinary dispositions called out for research that would treat the market as the central unit of study and thus bring markets back into the focus of contemporary marketing thought (Venkatesh & Peñaloza 2006; Giesler 2008; Layton 2009; Araujo et al. 2010).

Many have since then answered the call and sought to study markets via various routes. Out of this burgeoning field, we have seen at least two distinct streams of literature emerge: the market system research in consumer culture theory (CCT), recently labelled as market system dynamics (MSD) (Giesler & Fischer 2017), and the constructivist market studies (CMS) stream (Cochoy et al. 2016). While sharing the mission of studying market systems, MSD and CMS have developed their own research agendas, which they pursue with their own analytical tools. This diversity of approaches has contributed greatly to nuancing our understanding of how market systems work, but it also poses several challenges for marketing researchers. For instance, differences in terminological use and ontological positions obscure when the streams are saying the same thing and when they are advancing different points, which may discourage scholars from engaging with the full breath of available research. This paper aims to encourage such engagement by comparing the ways in which
the two streams conceptualize markets. We organize the comparison as a tentative conceptual map, which may help marketing scholars navigate the two streams of literature and take advantage of the accords and discords between them.

The streams’ prevailing conceptions of markets are mapped along three dimensions. The first dimension concerns the ontology of the market and sketches out the position of the three streams on matters such as relationality, materiality and multiplicity. The second dimension touches upon the temporal unfolding of the market and invokes notions such as stability and directionality to explain how the three streams conceptualize the process by which market systems develop over time. The third and final dimension maps out conceptions of market actors. Here, we explore who are the main agents of interests and how their agential capacities are thought to come into existence. By way of conclusion, we offer some recommendations for how the streams might benefit from each other and thereby advance together.

But before we commence our mapping exercise, a few cartographic caveats are in order. Like any map, ours represents a compromise between representativeness and readability. We thus set out to faithfully represent the intricacies of the streams but at the same time seek to tame the internal controversy that exists within them. In consequence, we risk representing the streams as monolithic blocks of ontological and terminological agreement, when this is seldom the case. While such simplification may be necessary in order to make the map readable and give it navigational value, one should keep in mind that the commitment to readability entails that our portrayal of the streams will not do equal justice to every individual article.

However, to avoid that our map becomes more caricatural than need be, the articles that we compare are chosen because they are central to and, we argue, representative of the streams to which they belong. The first step of evaluating their representativeness was to assess whether the
chosen article actually belongs to the stream we claim it belongs to. In this matter, we let the articles themselves speak, and placed them in the stream with which they self-identified or with which they were retrospectively identified by other articles. To further guard ourselves from opportunistic eclecticism in selecting the articles, we evaluated the articles’ importance to the streams both on ‘objective’ criteria, such as citation scores and the prestige of the journal in which they appeared. Lastly, however, we also included some articles that cannot be regarded as seminal works, but which we still found to reveal central aspects of the streams to which they belong. We, for example, included Anderson et al. (2008), not because of its seminalness or citation score, but because it elaborates on a theme that runs through the entire CMS stream, namely how market actors act.

Another challenge to our cartographic endeavor is the fact that both MSD and CMS have begun to branch out in recent years, which has resulted in the occasional “trespassing” of each other’s scholarly territories. Some recent MSD studies, for example, pay close attention to the agency of material objects (e.g. Martin & Schouten 2014), an analytical concern encoded in the very DNA of CMS. In light of these developments, one might easily be swayed to believe that the streams do not represent separate domains of knowledge after all. The reason we, nevertheless, treat them as distinct is because they identify themselves as such, either implicitly – i.e., by ignoring each other’s ideas – or explicitly – i.e., by openly distancing themselves from each other. For instance, in their introduction article to the MSD-themed special issue of *Marketing Theory*, Giesler and Fischer (2017) reinforce MSD’s image as a self-contained scholarly tradition by not referencing any CMS works in tracing the intellectual lineage of MSD.\(^1\) The boundaries between MSD and CMS are at other times erected more explicitly, for example when Cochoy et al. (2016) or Geiger et al. (2012) address how the CMS approach to markets differs from that of CCT, the scholarly tradition from which MSD springs. These examples of implicit and explicit distancing demonstrate that the

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\(^1\) This neglect is especially curious (but also telling) seeing that some of the household names of CMS also contributed to that special issue (Kjellberg & Olson 2017; Finch, Geiger and Harkness et al. 2017).
streams in question are, at least in identity, separate from each other. When holding the streams’ apparent separateness together with their recent ‘trespassing’ tendencies, the need for comparing the two streams seems particularly urgent – if for nothing else, then in order to be able to assess the rationale for holding onto distinct identities.

**The ontology of markets**

*Constructivisms*

What is a market? In answering this basic ontological question, both MSD and CMS adopt a constructivist outlook. Markets – and the rest of reality for that matter – are constructed through the interactions among various market actors. This ontological commitment implies that markets are not natural occurrences arising from a spontaneous (and mysterious) balancing of supply and demand, as classical economics tends to convey. In fact, both streams grew out of a resistance towards overly economistic conceptions of the market and continue to position this resistance at the very core of their *raison d’être*. Giesler and Fischer (2017), for example, express an ambition to combat an “economic actor bias” and encourage MSD scholars to move away from *a priori* privileging ‘producers’ and ‘consumers’ and their over-simplified dyadic interactions in their analyses. Similarly, Geiger et al. (2012) explain that CMS seeks to study “really existing” markets as opposed to the abstract (i.e., unrealistic) markets found in classical economic theory (see also Araujo et al. 2010). However, although agreeing that markets are constructed, the streams differ in what they mean by ‘construction’ and what they take markets to be ‘constructed of’.

Many MSD studies adhere to an ontological stance we may call ‘social constructivism’. In these studies, the market takes shape through a continuous process of negotiation, whereby social actors – producers, consumers, policy makers, the media, etc. – reach “shared understandings of what is being exchanged and why” (Humphreys 2010). The market, in this sense, springs from the collective mind of social actors. This ontological position is particularly apparent in the MSD
studies that employ institutional theory to understand markets. These studies commonly conceptualize markets as “fields comprising of a set of institutions” (Scaraboto & Fischer 2013), which give rise to institutional logics, that is, “socially constructed assumptions, values, and beliefs by which people in particular contexts provide meaning to their social reality” (ibid.; see also Dolbec & Fischer 2015; Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli 2015). As resources for meaning-making, institutional logics shape what takes place in the market arena, and the concept is thus employed by MSD scholars to explain how market meanings shape market realities. Together with other concepts popular in MSD, such as ‘discourses’ (e.g. Giesler 2012) and ‘legitimacy’ (e.g. Humphreys 2010a), the concept of institutional logics aptly encapsulates ‘market-making as meaning-making’ perspective that MSD’s social constructivist position endorses.

CMS adopts a position Kjellberg and Helgesson (2006) have labelled ‘practical constructivism’. This position draws on Actor-Network Theory (ANT) from Science and Technology Studies (STS) and “is concerned primarily with how the world is made, rather than how we make sense of it” (Anderson et al. 2008, 69). Here, then, ‘action’ takes ontological precedence over ‘meaning’. For, as Kjellberg and Helgesson (2007) clarify, social reality does not consist of “social constructions imposed on shapeless matter” but must rather be understood as a practical achievement. That means that reality does not exist prior to its practical definition but only emerges when ‘enacted’ – when it is, quite simply, carried out into the physical world. And so, too, are markets conceived as “practical outcomes” (Araujo et al. 2010). It is in this sense practices (or more precisely, “market practices” (Kjellberg & Helgesson 2006)) that “make markets real” (Kjellberg & Helgesson 2007). Markets are made, to give a mundane example, through the very act of going grocery shopping. Market-making is thus not a symbolic process of meaning-making but is instead tied to practical enactment.

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2 This also explains why CMS earlier went by the telling name of the ‘markets-as-practice’ approach (Geiger et al. 2012).
The difference between MSD’s social constructivism and CMS’s practical constructivism is well illustrated by how the two streams approach the role of ideas in constituting markets. When MSD scholars foreground the role of meaning-making, they quite explicitly grant ideas an important role. Ideas – packed up in complex bundles as ideologies, mythologies, institutional logics, and the like – become market-shaping, when they are invoked by market actors, who employ them as communicative tools for negotiating the meanings of marketplace objects (e.g. goods, services, brands, etc.). As an example, consider Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli’s (2015) conclusion that brand managers must carefully consider which institutional logics (i.e., ideas) they “enact” in order to create the desired brand meaning (or “brand associations”). In MSD, then, when market actors ‘enact’ or ‘perform’ ideas, they draw off their expressive power to settle or unsettle the shared understandings of marketplace reality.

Despite its concern with the practical dimension of markets, CMS also emphasizes the constitutive power of ideas. In fact, CMS scholars initially developed the vocabulary of ‘market practices’ in order to be able “to take seriously the role of ideas in the making of markets” (Kjellberg & Helgesson 2007). However, the ideas on the minds of CMS scholars are very different from the ideas populating MSD studies. Where MSD scholars tend to focus on expressive and symbolically-laden ideas (“brand images” (Giesler 2012) being a striking example), CMS scholars concern themselves with the functional and technical ideas that help market actors accomplish market practices. They focus on the knowledge, theories and techniques of market actors “in the wild” (Nilsson & Helgesson 2015) (e.g. marketers) and study “how […] ideas about markets [can] come to influence real markets” (Kjellberg & Helgesson 2006). Drawing inspiration from Callon and his work on the performativity of economics, CMS scholars show how marketing theories and models are performatve in the sense that they “not only represent markets but also affect how markets work” (Araujo et al. 2010; see also Mason et al. 2015). Here, then, ideas can have market-shaping
power because they inform the actions of market actors and thereby the practices that constitute the market. In CMS, ideas come to matter through practical definition and not symbolic expression, as MSD tends to convey.

*Relationality*

On reviewing the definitions of ‘social constructivism’ and ‘practical constructivism’ presented above, one could easily become inclined to think that the main ontological difference derives from what analytical level the streams bestow ontological primacy. Where MSD appears to account for markets in terms of macro-structures (e.g. institutions and discourses), CMS seems more concerned with micro-situated actions (i.e., practices). This would, however, be a misunderstanding. In fact, the two streams are quite similar in how they think about the ‘levels’ of market systems, both emphasizing that system levels essentially co-constitute each other. It does not make sense to treat a discourse, for example, as pertaining only to one analytical level, because it is continuously shaped by situated agents, who are themselves in turn shaped by the discourse. Neither discourse nor agents have any inherent qualities but are defined by the relations that tie them together. Both streams thus subscribe to a deeply relationalist ontological position.

In MSD, this ontological position is most evident in the stream’s impetus towards “[u]npacking the co-constitutive relationships between micro-, market-, and macro levels of analysis” (Giesler & Fischer 2017). To stick with the example of discourses and agents, Karababa and Ger (2011) explain in the historical context of the Ottoman Empire that it was the ‘interlacing’ of macro-level discourses of state resistance and micro-level transgressive consumer identities that brought both phenomena into existence and gave shape to a culture of coffeehouse consumption and an appertaining market.
Likewise, CMS and its practical ontology do not “[assume] an essential distinction between [practices taking place at] micro- and macro-levels” (Kjellberg & Helgesson 2006) but instead treat all practices as local, meaning that every market practice is situated within a particular practical context. There is thus no difference in scale between the practices of “paying in cash at the gas station” or “analyzing the structure of the petroleum industry” (Kjellberg & Helgesson 2006), the latter involving highly local activities such as employing particular analytical frameworks (e.g. Porter’s Five Forces) or writing up a report using a particular device (e.g. pen and paper or computer). What is more, the purchase of gasoline and the industry analysis are co-constitutive in the sense that the gas station exchange alters the analysis (e.g. by improving the analyzed companies’ bottom line), just like the analysis alters the exchange (e.g. by calling attention to the industry’s pollution levels and making consumers see their own gasoline consumption in a new light). In typical ANT-style, the ontology of CMS is thus utterly flat; there are no hierarchically ordered levels of analysis.

In fact this radical position reveals a small glimpse of divergence from the relationality of MSD. For while CMS completely ignores the micro-macro distinction and banishes it from its conceptual vocabulary – Kjellberg and Helgesson (2006) being the exception that confirms the rule – MSD retains the language of levels as a useful conceptual device for attending to their co-constitution.

There is one difference, however, that extends beyond deviating vocabularies and that more fundamentally separates the relationality of MSD from that of CMS. The co-constitutive relationships that tend to attract MSD scholar’s interest are often thoroughly semiotic. They explore how “[h]ow actors, institutions and culture interact to shape marketplace reality” (Giesler & Fischer 2017), or more precisely, how a diverse array of semiotic entities, such as ideologies, discourses, and identities, relate to establish the cultural meaning of what is being exchanged (e.g. products,

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3 As is typical for ANT. See Latour (1991) (ANT and After).
services, brands) and who is conducting the exchanges. A pertinent example is Giesler’s (2012) study of the creation of the Botox market, which he conceptualizes as a “brand-mediated legitimation process” in which “mythic narratives”, “technophilic and technophobic ideologies” and “brand images” interacted to shape the meaning of Botox and its users.

The relationality in CMS is different. Although CMS agrees with the semiotic wisdom that reality is relationally constituted, CMS does not confine its analytical gaze to the semiotic relations that underpin cultural meanings. Instead and in keeping with its practical orientation, CMS extends ontological relationality to the material world and may thus been seen as an exponent of a “material semiotics” – or a “ruthless application of semiotics”, to use Law’s well-chosen wording. Markets are not just ‘webs of meaning’ but rather networks comprising both techno-material and socio-semiotic entities and can therefore be described as “socio-technical agencements” (Çalışkan & Callon 2010). And it is in this way the inter-relations among a heterogeneous pool of entities that give markets shape.

To take a tangible example, consider Hagberg’s (2016) account of the transformation of a seemingly trivial technology, the shopping bag. Hagberg explains that the meaning of the shopping bag changed “from “innocuous” to “dangerous threat”” by being integrated into a series of practices. For example, around the 1960s in Sweden, the use of shopping bags were integrated into the practice of ‘disposing waste’ and eventually became such a popular device for disposing that they themselves ended up representing a waste problem. This led to a shift in the public debate, where shopping bags became criticized for their harmful environmental effects. Two effects followed. First, to reduce the use of bags, grocery stores began charging for the bags, which until then had been free, thus integrating shopping bags into a new practice, ‘selling’. And second, grocery stores changed the physical properties of bags and increasingly began producing them from more sustainable materials to reduce their environmental imprint. However, fewer bags and a less
robust design spelled trouble for waste management companies, who in response voiced their concern with the development and thereby contributed to shaping the image of shopping bags. From this account, we see that both material and semiotic entities matter and that they matter by virtue of their mutual relation: Shopping bags take their material shape under influence from how they are discursively represented, but they also themselves shape the discourses surrounding them.

To appreciate how this practical constructivist narrative contrasts with the relationality typically espoused by MSD scholars, consider again Giesler’s (2012) account of the Botox market. Here, the development of Botox’ brand image is solely driven by ideological contestations and there is no mention of how the technological evolution of Botox may have interfered with this process (for an elaboration of this point, see Bajde (2014)). While this omission may be due to the context in which Giesler writes – maybe the techno-material makeup of Botox did not play a significant role in the process he portrays – the omission is no less telling in terms of pointing out the kind of relationality that interests MSD scholars.

To be fair, it should be mentioned that even in the most semiotics-oriented MSD studies, the relationship between material reality and symbolic meanings are not entirely ignored. In a study of the legitimation of casino gambling, for example, Humphreys (2010b) notes that the physical establishment of casinos fulfilled an important legitimating function. However, while such acknowledgements are not uncommon in MSD literature, theorizations of how materiality partakes in constituting markets are seldom as elaborate or sophisticated as theorizations of the role of symbolism in market dynamics. To bridge this gap, some MSD scholars have recently begun to concentrate more explicitly on material-semiotic relationships and study, e.g. through the lens of ANT and assemblage theories, how material objects and physical spaces are constitutively involved in shaping markets (e.g. Schouten 2014; Castilho et al. 2017). However, such studies remain rare.
On temporal unfolding

How do markets unfold over time? Addressing these questions, the stances of CMS and MSD vary on two interrelated matters: *stability* and *direction* of market unfolding.

Firstly, in line with their critique of equilibrium-seeking markets found in classical economics, MSD and CMS agree that stability is hard to come by in markets. Instead, markets are fluid and fragile entities. Giesler (2008), for example, stresses that markets move “through stages of perpetual structural instability”, as their meanings are continuously negotiated among various marketplace actors. The meaning of markets (and hence their realities) are trapped in a process of constant cultural tension and thus never truly settle. And although the process of market unfolding in CMS is a material one, it is no less dynamic, as markets are seen as “ever-changing performances” (Araujo et al. 2008), ceaselessly emerging and re-emerging in an endless process of practical definition. Both streams, in other words, focus on the processual dimension of markets – on becoming rather than being (Giesler & Fischer 2017), on “the verbs (the process) rather than the nouns (the outcome)” (Kjellberg & Helgesson 2007).

However, when looking at the actual analyses conducted by the streams, subtle differences appear. These differences emerge most clearly when examining how the two streams visually represent market development. Where MSD depict market development visually, markets emerge and develop in a linear fashion, in a progressive sequence of stages or steps (e.g. Martin & Schouten 2014; Giesler 2008, 2012; Humphreys 2010a). Interestingly, a sense of stability lurks in these linear representations. For here, markets evolve when one market form emerges triumphant over its predecessor and ushers in an (albeit brief) moment of market stability. Such stability is perhaps most striking in the MSD studies of institutionalized meanings and practices, that is, *enduring*
patterns of thought and behavior. So although MSD insists on the fluidity of markets, the portrayal of market unfolding as a sequence of ‘stages’ suggests that the development of markets is punctuated by fleeting moments of endurance.

In contrast, CMS scholars perceive market unfolding as “a continuous recursive process” (Kjellberg & Helgesson 2007, emphasis added) and, reflecting this view, their visual representations take on a circular shape (e.g. Kjellberg & Helgesson 2007; Araujo & Kjellberg 2016). Here, one market form never ‘triumphs’ and claims stability. CMS holds that markets never become settled, because they rely on actors recursively repeating the market practices that make them up. Were such repetitions to stop, the market would cease to exist. Consider for example Kjellberg and Helgesson (2007) model of market translations, which advances the point that it is the continuous interactions between different market activities that make markets unfold. Markets are put in motion when we talk about them (e.g. in advertisements or market reports) and act in them (e.g. engaging in exchanges). One important implication of this conception of market unfolding is that both market change as well as stability relies on continuous efforts; markets are always in flux, under practical construction, even when they appear stable. Kjellberg & Helgesson (2007) further underline this view by invoking Alderson and Cox’s point that “a market changes day by day through the very fact that goods are bought and sold” (Alderson and Cox 1948, 151; in Kjellberg and Helgesson 2007).

Another noteworthy implication is that market forms do not necessarily unfold as a successive chain, that is, as a linear process where one market form becomes replaced by the next. As long as different versions of the market are practically repeated, multiple market forms can co-exist (Kjellberg & Helgesson 2006). To again use Hagberg’s (2016) shopping bags as illustration, it is

4 Note, however, that this is less marked in the studies emphasizing co-existing, non-conflicting institutional logics (e.g. Scaraboto & Fischer 2013).
consumers’ recurrent use of shopping bags in practices of ‘shopping’, ‘disposing’, ‘selling’ and so on that continuously form the markets in which the shopping bags are embedded and that ensure that different versions of the shopping bags can co-exist, i.e., bags as shopping containers, bags as disposal device, bags as commodities.

To summarize, the streams’ divergent stands on the temporal unfolding of markets are apparent in their visual representations: MSD’s representations suggest linearity and momentary stability, while CMS’s representations emphasize recursivity and fragility. As has been suggested already, however, this divergence runs deeper than their visual representations. And, paradoxically, the divergence appears strongest when the two streams’ theoretical frameworks are most alike, namely when they both use ANT.

When MSD scholars employ ANT, they typically do so with reference to Callon’s (1986) classic work on the sociology of translation (e.g. Giesler 2012; Martin & Schouten 2014). Classic ANT has been criticized, however, for its tendency to “[offer] somewhat simplistic accounts of struggle over meaning, leading to the eventual stabilization of that meaning” (Bettany et al. 2014). While we do not necessarily agree that MSD’s accounts of cultural struggles are simplistic – indeed, MSD studies do well in capturing the complexity of cultural conflict – MSD studies do tend to portray the market development process that results from these struggles as somewhat simplistic. As a case in point, consider Giesler’s (2012) definition of “the market creation process as a progressive sequence of brand image contestations among opposing groups of stakeholders through which their divergent interests are aligned” (emphasis added). Giesler uses ANT to explain how different interpretations of Botox were able to wipe out their competitors (i.e., by aligning the interests of various stakeholders) and how, resultantly, at any point of the sequence of market unfolding only one interpretation existed. The sequence, what’s more, consists of a few, manageable number of steps, each marking a period of time in which one interpretation dominated and relative stability
reigned. Giesler’s use of ANT thus illustrates the conception of markets as progressing in a linear, step-wise fashion.

Although CMS is indebted to classic ANT, the style of ANT that CMS employs is more akin to what has been labeled ‘after-ANT’. ‘After-ANT’ stands firm on the complexity of the world, and is reflected in CMS’s recent move to agencement and agencing, a move incited by a desire to rid their analyses of any “connotations of frozen socio-technical arrangements and stable structures” (Cochoy et al. 2016). Market agencing means both arranging market elements to each other and infusing the resulting arrangements with the capacity to act (and further, just to appreciate the complexity of agencing, to agence new agencing-capable agencements). Seen as a market creation process, agencing thus underlines CMS’s view that markets unfold recursively: “The agencing process is […] recursive; an agencement both configures and is enabled through particular agencies” (Araujo & Kjellberg 2016). Agencing thus also implies that any instance of market change is always involved in setting up further changes. As Kjellberg and Araujo (2016) state, “agencing produces its own internal tensions; the investments necessary to produce specific arrangements aimed at creating specific agencies are always liable to be re-interpreted and re-appropriated”. The agencing of shopping bags into a tool for waste management, for example, also transformed the bags into unwelcome objects of waste themselves (Hagberg 2016). In this way, agencing becomes a way for CMS scholars to capture the “inescapable instability of markets and market entities” (Cochoy et al. 2016). Agencing and CMS’s post-ANT stance thus point to the instability of markets and their recursive unfolding.

**On agency**

Who are the agents that give markets form and direction? And how do such agential capabilities come into existence? We address these questions, first, by accounting for which agents the streams
traditionally have granted analytical attention and, second, by exploring how the streams conceptualize the constitution of agency.

_Focal agents_

CMS hails from Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group (IMP Group) and CMS work started gaining traction when “a group of like-minded researchers […] formed a Market Studies group and ran a series of special tracks at IMP conferences” (Araujo et al. 2008). It should therefore come as no surprise that CMS scholars have traditionally been concerned with ‘industrial actors’ (e.g. B2B marketers working with industrial segmentation or procurement) and publish frequently in _Industrial Marketing Management_. Recently, however, consumers and consumption have begun to attract the attention of CMS scholars, who have produced a number of articles on the agency of the consumer (e.g. Cochoy 2008; Kjellberg 2008), even putting together two CMS-dedicated special issues of the consumption-minded journal _Consumption, Markets and Culture_ (Geiger et al. 2012; Cochoy et al. 2016).

MSD springs from CCT and has, by implication, taken a particular interest in the consumer since its inception. However, it would be a mistake to think that the consumer is the only actor MSD scholars care about. Indeed, MSD – and CCT more generally (Giesler & Thompson 2016) – emphasize that consumers might well be the instigators of change (e.g. Martin & Schouten 2014) but they might just as well be on the receiving end of change. MSD literature also encompasses examples of how, for example, policy makers, marketers and media journalists shape consumption and markets (Giesler & Veresiu 2014; Giesler 2012; Humphreys 2010a). So, while MSD scholars’ allegiance to CCT entails that consumers always figure _somewhere_ in their analyses, consumers are by no means the only actors who are granted agential capacities.
So, although the two streams have traditionally adopted divergent empirical foci, it would seem that their research interests have started to overlap, both observing agency through a broad empirical lens in order to explore how a vast and diverse array of agents shapes markets. However, as we saw in the other dimensions, this apparent alignment can be deceiving. Indeed, if we take a closer look at how the streams actually conceive of agency and its constitution – what is an agent and how does agency emerge? – significant differences emerge.

**Making agency**

In MSD, agency is normally seen as a quality reserved for human beings, who become agents by wielding their voice as a discursive weapon to provoke or preserve the shared meanings of the market. Whether figuring in the role of fatshionistas (Scaraboto & Fischer 2013), cyberpunks (Giesler 2008), or brand managers (Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli 2015), agents thus shape markets through communicative action.

CMS broadens the concept of agency. In keeping with their ANT heritage, CMS scholars stress that both humans and material objects possess agency and, by implication, their market-shaping potential must be considered on equal terms. It is important to stress, however, that neither humans nor objects act upon markets alone. Rather, both kinds of entities must join forces and act in association in order to form the (heterogeneous) agents that continuously enact markets. The agency of contemporary consumers, for example, derives as much from the human mind as it does from the shopping cart enabling consumers to engage in mass shopping (Cochoy 2008). CMS scholars are thus concerned with how agency becomes “configured” (Anderson et al. 2008), that is, put together in a specific constellation of human and material actors.

In this sense, CMS concerns itself with the processual dimension of agency. By contrast, Stigzelius (forthcoming) has criticized MSD and CCT for taking agency as a given thing. Writing about the
context of political consumer action, Stigzelius argues that MSD scholars tend to “to assume that active consumers already exist at the outset of the studies, which potentially leaves out many other possible actor configurations of consumers in markets”. This assumption may be rooted in MSD’s tendency to treat agency as tied to humans’ ‘voice’ – that is, their capacity to “speak up” and discursively sculpt the meaning of the market.\(^5\) Indeed, voice is a basic human quality and not something that is acquired. And as such, it grants humans an innate capacity for agency, for although it may lie latent, their voice is always there, present, waiting to be raised.

However, while MSD certainly devotes less attention to the making of agency, the topic is not entirely absent in MSD studies. Consider for example the MSD studies that explore the formation of ‘consumer subjects’ (Giesler & Veresiu 2014; Karababa & Ger 2011). Although these studies never explicitly address the relationship between ‘subjectivity’ and ‘agency’, it seems that they use the term ‘subject’ to mean an entity endowed with agency, and they are thus concerned with how agents are made. Previously in this paper, we met Karababa and Ger’s (2011) Ottoman coffeehouse consumers, who defied the moral prescriptions of the state and defined their own ethical guidelines for how to spend leisure time, thus establishing themselves as “active consumer subject[s]”. Giesler and Veresiu (2014) also address how ethics is an essential aspect of agency making, explaining that the contemporary responsible consumer subject has emerged from a process of moralization:

“The neoliberal mythology of shared responsibility valorizes the solution of social problems through morally responsible market actors. Hence, larger problems in society (e.g., poverty, illness, natural disaster) will set a moralization process in motion through which responsibility is shifted away from the state and corporations and reassigned onto the individual agent.”

\(^5\) Important here: In MSD, even practices “speak” in the sense that their relevance reside in what they express (and not what they do).
It is thus clear that MSD at least to some extent shares CMS’s interest in how agency is made, and portraits the process as a social negotiation, whereby humans draw on and defy various idealist structures, e.g. mythologies and moral discourses, to establish themselves as active subjects.

Although these deep idealist roots of agency represent a clear break with CMS’s emphasis on the practical dimensions of agency, at certain times MSD’s conceptualization of agency making comes remarkably close to that of CMS. Giesler and Veresiu (2014), for example, explain that one important step of the formation of the responsible consumers is “capabilization”, meaning the development of a market that provide consumers with the products and services necessary to consume in morally responsible ways (e.g. energy-efficient technologies). Here, then, MSD resembles CMS’s claim that consumer agency is formed in interplay between consumers and their ‘equipment’, e.g. shopping carts or shopping bags. However, where CMS stresses that consumers’ ‘equipment’ partakes in constituting agency, for Giesler and Veresiu the material tools are merely tools, which assist the agential protagonists, the consumers, to give their agency expression.

Other central differences persist. For example, one could call into question whether MSD is studying the making of agency at all, or merely the discovery of it. Indeed, when Karababa and Ger (2011) reflect on their study, they state that their findings “corroborate Trentmann (2006, 21), who shows that the development of the consumer points to “the centrality of political tradition, civil society and ethics through which agents discovered themselves as active consumers,”” (emphasis added). MSD thus studies how agents become aware of their own agency. In this sense, we could argue that MSD is concerned with how agents become reflexive, self-identifying entities, while CMS concerns itself with how agents are put together in the first place (Kjellberg 2008, 161).

The final difference that we want to highlight here is the perceived durability of agency. When MSD scholars talk about the subjects that result from ‘subjectification’, they usually refer to rather
enduring subject roles. Karababa and Ger (2011), for example, set out to show that the active consumer did not originate “during seventeenth-century to nineteenth-century Western Europe and North America”, as the existence of the Ottoman coffeehouse consumer evidences. This claim implies that the active consumer subject has lasted for centuries, as the active consumer of the Ottoman Empire corresponds to the subject position that emerged in the West many years later. The subjectivities portrayed by Giesler and Veresiu (2014) are similarly enduring in that they represent the very subjects that have underpinned the market economy during the neoliberal era.

The agents in CMS studies are more fragile and varied and so too is the process of their constitution. CMS emphasis on agencing (i.e., the making of acengy) “directs attention to how and why particular configurations of heterogeneous elements emerge that produce particular agencies in concrete spatio-temporal circumstances” (Araujo & Kjellberg 2016). In other words, CMS proposes that agents are provisional and local entities: they exist in a specific moment at a specific place. Consider for example Araujo and Kjellberg’s (2016) study of the emergence of frequent flyer programs (PPF) in the US, which was directed at creating a ‘loyal frequent flyer’ agent but resulted in the formation of several other agencies (or agent configurations). Importantly, these agencies do not represent enduring consumer ‘archetypes’, but rather highly particular roles, whose makeup is sensitive to even minor changes in the market. For example, Araujo and Kjellberg (2016) explain how the introduction of rival loyalty programs led to yet other agent configurations. CMS thus takes aim at accounting for the rich variation of market agents (Anderson et al. 2008), whereas MSD tends to focus on more general agential patterns that endure during particular market forms.

**Discussion and conclusion**

We have so far focused on comparison, and commented little on how our map can actually be used. The map is thus little worth as a treasure map: there is no big fat cross indicating where the treasure
chest of novel insights lies hidden. Yet, our hope is that the comparison in itself will inspire scholars to push the frontier of market systems theorizing and explore markets through new routes of research. By way of conclusion, we do, however, wish to sprinkle the map with some tentatively drawn crosses, which we hope may guide future researchers in fruitful directions.

*How can CMS learn from MSD?*

We start by addressing how MSD work may illuminate the path to be tread by CMS scholars. One fruitful area of inquiry may be to find inspiration in MSD’s wide repertoire of symbolic entities that influence market creation. It would be interesting, for example, to explore how different ‘representational practices’ (Kjellberg & Helgesson 2007) might lead to different symbolic consequences. We might speculate that whether representation takes the form of discourse, branding or mythology is important for how the representational practices will impact on the other market practices. It would, in other words, be interesting to bring CMS’s appreciation of the *heterogeneity of representation* on equal terms with the stream’s appreciation of the *heterogeneity of materiality*. In this regard, Geiger and Finch’s (2016) recent work on ‘market narratives’ looks promising and serve as a source of inspiration for future CMS work in that direction.

Another suggestion for CMS scholars would be to take seriously the question of reflexivity in agency-making, that is, how actors’ self-awareness might alter their constitution as agents. In CMS, this aspect of agency tends to get lost among the many material elements that enable agents to act. Reflexivity, however, figures prominently in MSD analyses, where agency emerges when agents become reflexively aware of their own agency, that is, when they self-identify as agents. Therefore, CMS scholars might look towards MSD to find inspiration for finding an ontological space for reflexivity in their studies, explicating what this human quality implies for the constitution of agents and markets. We are not the first to propose research along this direction (Anderson et al. 2008), but
little work has been done on the role of reflexivity in constituting agents (Kjellberg 2008 being a notable exception).

_How can MSD learn from CMS?_

In turn, MSD scholars might benefit from taking inspiration from CMS’s emphasis on “agential variation” (Anderson et al. 2008), that is, the many different configurations agency might take. If MSD is to truly embrace markets as “complex social systems” (Giesler & Fischer 2017), it would be beneficial to not only look at the many different _categories_ of actors (e.g. consumers, producers, policymakers, the media, etc.), but also explore the internal variation that exists within these categories. Taking the media as an example (see e.g. Humphreys 2010a), MSD scholars would be encouraged to ask what influence different newspapers (not to mention different kinds of media outlets) have on market making. And why exactly might they influence markets differently?

An increased focus on how agency is made and not only realized would also allow MSD scholars to more effectively address why some markets thrive and others falter. Here, it seems particularly urgent to explicate the relationship between subjectivity and agency. If there is a significant difference, it would be useful explore empirical cases where the development of the two diverge. When and how does a subject become an agent – and vice versa?

_Travel companions or solitary explorers?_

One final question still lurks in the background of our map: given the recent rapprochement between MSD and CMS we described earlier, does it even makes sense for the two streams to identify as separate research domains? What do the streams gain by sticking to their separate identities and what do they lose? And in turn, what would be gained and lost if they were to join forces in their common mission of exploring market systems? We leave these questions to be
answered by the streams’ adherents themselves, a task for which we hope our map will prove helpful.
References


