Emerging Market (Sub)Systems and Consumption Field Refinement

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In this conceptual paper, we introduce a meso-level theoretical framework (Consumption Field Refinement) to explain the development of market systems and suggest methods for researching this development. Our framework centres on the idea that the market system consists of interlinked subsystems (consumption fields), each focused on a particular consumption activity.

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ABSTRACT

In the popular culture of critical journalism (Klein 1999; Schlosser 2001), the detailed unpacking of specific market systems in terms of institutional details, organizational structures and their effects has, as pointed out by Thompson (2007), contributed with the rare but important scholarship needed to understand the functions, ideologies and complexities of how market systems work. In recent years an increased, holistic understanding of whole market systems has been called for in consumer culture theory, CCT (Arnould and Thompson 2005), as a needed complement to researchers’ (occasionally) too strong a focus on phenomenological lived experience (Askegaard and Linnet 2011), as the pivotal core of market evolution (Giesler 2008), and as a manifestation of larger social relations and structures (Üstüner and Thompson 2012). But in contrast to the journalistic works mentioned above, academic consumer culture research lacks detailed empirical work that identifies and contextualises these structural relationships according to cultural dynamics and norms, ideological conditions, social structures and historical conditions. The need has indeed been identified (Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Giesler 2008; Holt 2003) but the methodological implications remain vague or even non-existent. What does Holt (2003: 49) mean in practice when he calls for knowledge that “doesn’t come from focus groups or ethnography or trend reports—the marketer’s usual means for ‘getting close to the customer’”? Holt (2003: 49) suggests that this knowledge might come “from a cultural historian’s understanding of ideology as it waxes and wanes, a sociologist’s charting of the topography of contradictions the ideology produces, and a literary critic’s expedition into the culture that engages these contradictions”. But, given that research in CCT seldom engages in these expeditions, we argue that we lack guidelines on how to integrate it with our more usual phenomenological consumer focus.

Regardless of how imperative it is to highlight concrete methods with which CCT researchers can empirically explore the dynamics of market systems, we first need to refine the conceptual frameworks in order to do so. The frameworks used today to explain market dynamics are typically grand (and sometimes unclear), which is probably one reason why it is difficult to find empirical research on the matter (other than from journalists, who do not suffer under the institutional demand of theoretical contribution). Holt’s (2002) dialectical model of branding and consumer culture is a typical example of a macro-level model that tries to supply grand theoretical explanations for the development of a market system. Holt’s analysis is based on consumers’ micro-level stories about their consumption and, although his historical analysis is theoretically appealing, the leap he makes from micro-level consumer stories to macro-level model is very long. This not only raises methodological questions regarding the trustworthiness of this type of analysis but also, and perhaps more importantly, generates questions about how to conceptualise the development of a market system on a meso-level. Schau, Muñiz and Arnould (2009) take a more meso-level approach in their analysis of the value-creating practices of brand communities. We agree with their assertion that “value is manifested in the collective…rather than firm-consumer dyads” (2009:41). However, as Schau et al focus on individual brands, their findings cannot sufficiently explain market subsystems that consist of diverse brands and products. The purpose of this conceptual paper is therefore two-fold: firstly we introduce a (tentative) theoretical framework to conceptualise the development of market systems on a mid-range (or meso-) level; secondly, we spell out methodological suggestions for how to study such development.

INTRODUCING THE CFR FRAMEWORK

In this section we introduce the Consumption Field Refinement (CFR) framework with the aim of conceptualising the development of market systems on a meso-level.

A market system consists of a physical collection of commercially connected entities as well as a symbolic collection of cultural meanings and interactions, hence a market culture. In addition to Giesler’s (2008) and Holt’s (2002) conceptualizations of the evolution (rejuvenation) of a market culture as a dialectical interplay between two macro-entities—the branding paradigm and the contemporary consumer culture—we suggest that on a mid range level the market system consists of several subsystems, or consumption fields, that together make up the entire (macro-) market system. Consequently, in order to understand how the entire market system and the entire consumer culture develops; we need to understand the development of its constituting subsystems—the various consumption fields. We propose that the development of each consumption field is propelled by the actions of three main entities: the consumers; firms/brand owners; and media, where consumers and their interest is the strongest driving force in the development process. The state may also influence the evolution of consumption fields, for instance by encouraging, discouraging or outlawing types of consumption. However, as we do not believe that the state is a necessary entity in the evolution of consumption fields, we will leave this complicated area to other researchers.

We hereby introduce a (tentative) theoretical framework, which we refer to as Consumption Field Refinement (CFR) to conceptualise the development of market systems on a meso-level, see figure 1. In the following sections, we will further explain the different elements of the framework.

Figure 1: The CFR Framework
DRIVING FORCES OF THE CFR FRAMEWORK

In this section we develop our ideas and outline the various elements constituting the Consumption Field, which is the centrepiece of the CFR framework.

The Consumption Field refers to a consumption-oriented interest around which consumers gather and organize. The concept is heavily influenced by Bourdieu’s (1984) idea of social fields (see also Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992)—a concept that has been widely used in CCT (Arsel and Thompson 2011; Holt 1997; 1998; Üstüner and Holt 2010; Üstüner and Thompson 2012). A social field can be seen as a micro-cosmos of the social organization of society itself where people strive for status and power—thus playing the status game—by drawing upon resources that Bourdieu (1984) refers to as various forms of capital: social, cultural and economic (see also Veblen [1899]1994). More capital (as a combination) provides higher status and power, making the presence of status hierarchies, rules and norms quite obvious. Bourdieu (1984) and Holt (1997; 1998) see society being comprised of an aggregation of separate macro-level fields—e.g. the field of consumption, the field of art, the field of religion, and so on. Consumption then is seen as a single field that encompasses all consumer interests, whether in food, furniture, fashion or something else. We, like Arsel and Thompson (2011), would rather envisage each of these macro-fields as a collection of different meso-fields. In our CFR framework, the field of consumption encompasses several separate consumption fields, each of which relates to a different consumption interest. Each of these meso-fields is “roughly equivalent to prior conceptualizations of subcultures of consumption” (Arsel and Thompson 2011: 793). Like Arsel and Thompson, we refer to these meso-fields merely as consumption fields.

Here we would like to emphasise that consumption fields draw together multiple—rather than single—product categories and commercial experiences via a dialectic interplay between consumers and the various commercial actors that see opportunities to capitalize on an emerging consumption field. We have, for some time, observed how consumers convene around particular brands to form communities and subcultures as a result of a common interest in those brands (Belk and Tumbat 2005; McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Muniz and Schau 2005; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). However, what we, here, refer to as a consumption field may consist of many, sometimes interlinked, types of communities or subcultures, and thus pertain to a wider form of consumer interest than that ascribed to one single community. The Foodie Culture is one example (Cairns, Johnston, and Bauman 2010). It is its own little system with its own culture that involves many different product categories and industries (e.g. food, equipment, books, competitions) without being exclusive like a members club. Over time, the consumption field has been so refined and internally interlinked that it can be broadly defined as a sub-system situated in a larger social organisational scheme. In these respects a consumption field is conceptually tighter than both Bourdieu’s (1984) aggregated social class lifestyles and Holt’s (1998) “tastes and consumer practices across a variety of popular cultural categories”, but broader than specific product categories, brands, or brand communities—although such distinct formations are, no doubt, at the core of the broader formation, the system and the culture. We may therefore have something to learn from studies of value co-creation in brand communities (e.g. Schau et al 2009). But we believe that previous research on status hierarchy formation in communities (Kozinets 2001; Ostberg 2007; Schouten and McAlexander 1995) should be more relevant in this discussion, as we believe that it is status that drives the consumer interest on which a consumption field thrives.

Consumer Interest in a certain consumption area is central to the emergence and development of a consumption field. Without consumer interest, there is no development. However, there is a dearth of theory on how and why consumers develop interest in a particular consumption category and thus, how and why new fields emerge. The formation of fields is not addressed by Bourdieu (1984) or Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992). The emergence of the field of art was described by Bourdieu (1996) but no theoretical framework was proposed. We suspect that any consumption category that has not yet been colonized by consumer cultivation as a means to form identity and gain status may constitute a viable and attractive opportunity for such motives. As more traditional lifestyle consumption categories have been exploited by consumers looking to obtain recognition and status, middle class consumers increasingly look for new fertile areas to utilise for identity construction (Belk 1988; Bertilsson 2009; Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998; Hirschman 1980) and distinction (Holt 1998; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Ulver-Sneistrup 2008). Since product categories such as fashion/clothing (Bertilsson 2009; Thompson and Haytko 1997), cars (McAlexander et al 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001), motorcycles (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), computers (Belk and Tumbat 2005; Muniz and Schau 2005) and TV-shows (Kozinets 1997; Kozinets 2001) have already been over-exploited by consumers with a desire for aesthetization and distinction, we argue that consumers tend to (consciously or otherwise) look for unexplored consumption fields—which are less single-product-focused and more interest-focused. Consumption categories that were previously considered mundane, every-day or boring may be a last resort for consumers who find that all other areas have already been colonized.

Consumers immerse themselves within these unexplored consumption fields, and develop extensive knowledge and experience, thus becoming what Holt (1998) refers to as high cultural capitals within that field. In this way, consumption fields develop and are refined. For example, running, as consumption field, has developed immensely in recent years: as more consumers have taken them up, certain types of running have become more mainstream while more niche forms have gained popularity. Marathon running is no longer quite as unusual as it once was, but other forms of endurance running have become more popular as media of distinction (e.g. triathlons and ultra-running). The type of running one does (barefoot versus ordinary running), the distances and other challenges one includes (marathons, ultra-runs, triathlons), and the equipment one purchases to participate; these are all potential sources of status and opportunities for distinction. We would argue then that it is consumers’ need for recognition and status that drives interest within a consumption category, and consequently the development of new consumption fields.

Refinement Materials are resources in the form of products, brands, symbolic material, services and information, which may be contributed by firms/brand owners or media, as well as consumers. They feed consumers’ newly acquired consumption interests, and are therefore essential in order for consumption fields to develop and be refined. Holt’s classic (1998) CCT article suggests that accumulated cultural capital is consumers’ main resource for positioning themselves in consumer culture. While we agree that various forms of symbolic capital are at work in newly formed consumption fields, we also argue that other resources are required in order for new fields to emerge. For this reason, we concentrate on less abstract resources in our CFR framework.

Wilk (2006) supplies an interesting description for how water has developed from a market obscurity and a commodity to a cultural consumer product as a response to an increased consumer interest and the actions of marketers. We argue that the actions of
three different entities are necessary to ensure consumer interest and consumption field refinement. Firms/brand owners, media, and consumers must all contribute refinement material if a new consumption field is to emerge and take-off. Firms might feed a new consumption interest by developing and marketing a widening range of products, innovations and brands. Consumers then cultivate themselves via the consumption of these products, innovations and brands, and the refined knowledge and taste they develop in relation to them. Media might also contribute resources in the form of expert knowledge and cool advocates supplied through lifestyle magazines or trendy TV-programs. Media resources help to convey the newly developed consumer interest to the overall audience, which includes both consumers and firms. Consumers might contribute refinement material in the form of blog posts, recipes, and so on, that serve to inspire interest in other consumers or to reinforce the importance of the growing consumption field in the eyes of media and firms. It is worth noting here that there may be overlaps in our framework’s categories. Consumer bloggers may also be considered media. Celebrities may straddle the line between media and firms/brand owners. Jamie Oliver, celebrity chef, could be considered media but his range of sauces, garlic crushers and flavour shakers may also make him a brand owner.

Consumer interest need not necessarily be initiated by consumers themselves. It is possible to imagine a scenario where firms or media use their refinement materials to purposively create a consumer interest in a certain consumption activity. However, such an undertaking would probably require fairly heavy resource investment. And there is no guarantee that consumer interest would be piqued. Regardless of which entity initiates the consumer interest, from our perspective, consumption field refinement can only occur, and new consumption fields develop, if all three entities—consumers, firms/brand owners and media—interact, perform their parts and contribute their refinement materials.

COMPLETING THE CFR FRAMEWORK

In this section, we outline how consumers, firms/brand owners and media fit into the CFR framework and suggest how we might go about finding out more about their roles in consumption field refinement. As stated, we see these entities as the most important forces in consumption field refinement and market evolution (i.e. in constructing, destructing or reforming market (sub)systems for the development of new consumption fields).

Consumers as Entities in the Market (Sub)System. Although the consumption field itself consists of consumers’ practices and engagements, consumers, as entities, should be conceptually lifted out of the consumption field triangle as they must be analysed like the other entities in the market (sub)system. Within the CFR framework, consumers may organize themselves or act as individuals—although this can still be objectively patterned (Holt 1997; 1998). It is among consumers that refinement processes, or n erfication, is manifested and hence researchable. Research questions that could be asked are: How and when do consumers pick up on or start new consumption fields? How does the dialectic process look from their perspective? How are hierarchies, or other power structures, patterned? What is construed as cool and why? How do meaning structures evolve? How do consumers become part of (non)co-productive processes of meaning and culture with other entities?

Firms/Brand Owners as Entities in the Market (Sub)System. Firms and brands can be regarded as another key entity. Their main role is in providing refinement material to the consumption field. Firms/brand owners are interested in discovering and effectuating new ways to capitalise on consumer interest. Their dialectic and longitudinal relationship (Giesler 2008; Holt 2002) with consumers makes active coproduction with consumers a possibility (Arvidsson 2005; 2008; Humphrey and Grayson 2008; Schau and Muniz 2009). This creates opportunities to speed up consumer desire for new and refined products and experiences. This is where “innovation” is most often initiated. Potential research questions could be: How and when do firms/brand owners pick up on or start new consumption fields? How does the dialectic process look from their perspective, e.g. market research, shops, or campaigns? How are consumption fields discovered and capitalized upon? How are consumer meanings retrieved and acted upon in communication and product development? What power structures emerge?

Media as Entities in the Market (Sub)System. TV, blogs, magazines, pop culture and social media are normally regarded as intermediaries in the dialectic process between consumers and firms. However, if one wants to investigate consumption field refinement, media must be emphasized as an entity on its own. The media may benefit itself by being a main player in creating a new consumption field that grows and is refined. We argue that the media itself may initiate a new consumption field even before consumers and firms have identified it. From that perspective it then becomes interesting to pose research questions such as: How and when do media pick up on or start new consumption fields? How does the dialectic process with consumers and/or firms look from media’s perspective? How do media fit into power structures and what does this mean for social relations?

The process of CFR has logically been simplified for the purpose of the framework and we are well aware that real-life emergence and refinement of fields is likely to operate in a more nuanced and less linear fashion.

INVESTIGATING CFR

In this section, we identify methods to explore the dialectic and co-productive CFR process.

CCT researchers often have ambitions to contribute with “higher context” understandings (Askegaard and Linnet 2011). However, methods for how to investigate these higher contexts are seldom offered. Although some of the methods we outline below have been empirically demonstrated by consumer behaviour researchers (Scott 1994; Stern 1994), there is a dearth of concrete explanations and summaries of such concepts and methods. These, we argue, are needed if the idealised integration of individuals, structures and ideologies is to be realised.

Identifying the entities and their relationships within the consumption field. This approach involves obtaining a rough idea of what the market (sub)system is, including some kind of identification of what entities are involved. For example, who are the brand owners, producers, consumers, and media actors? This part of the investigation would be the closest to what Naomi Klein, and other journalists have done in their investigations of whole industries. This would be pure and simple footwork in terms of finding, calling, travelling and interviewing informants. The key entities, as well as less obvious ones would need to be identified. One could then engage in real life (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott 2003) or netnographic (Kozinets 2001) longitudinal observations of and interviews with consumers. Interviews among commercial entities could also be pursued along with collection of material documents (e.g. marketing material, magazines, blogs). The purpose is to find out exactly what is happening here.

Defining the consumption field. According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), a specific social field can only be defined empirically. Üstüner and Thompson (2012: 799) add that a relational and structural analysis would be required to map out “the network of relations that position social actors in a given, historically shaped
field of power and status competitions over valued forms of capital. Hence, once one has identified the actors and their relationships, one can start defining the field. Power structures can be described based on the flows, exchange, and guarding of economic, social and cultural capital. This does not necessarily need to be in quantitative categories, as Holt (1998) did with cultural capital, but could rather be in comprehensive, relational and qualitative terms. For example, a baker offers sour dough bread to a consumer in exchange for money (economic capital), but because this specific consumer is connected to a clique of leading food bloggers (social capital), he also offers some expert narratives (cultural capital) that he knows will score highly in the bloggers’ informal connoisseurship hierarchy and hopefully lead to goodwill and publicity.

**Investigating the historical context.** Holt (2003: 49) argues “that when the national ideology crumbles and is then reinvented, new contradictions form”. Holt criticizes academics and practitioners for not understanding these contradictions and for wrapping themselves up in the social-psychologically-informed “consumer insight” paradigm when trying to understand social trends in consumer society. Instead, he proposes three historical approaches that we develop briefly below (2003:49):

I. A cultural historian’s understanding of ideology as it waxes and wanes. A cultural historian uses historical material in order to identify dominant ideologies in specific cultural contexts and times. A good example from CCT is Karababa and Ger’s (2010) sociohistorical (and cultural historical) investigation of the formation of the consumer subject in the development of the Ottoman coffeehouse consumer culture from the sixteenth century onward. They use a “critical documentarist approach to make sense of what a particular document might have meant at the time it was produced” (ibid: 740). They collect and analyse, for instance: expert analyses of poetry, interviews with historians, decrees from cultural authorities, poems, chronicles, books on morality and etiquette, price lists, miniatures, and drawings. One just has to use one’s imagination to realize that equivalent modern day sources can be found in printed media, as well as television and radio archives. Giesler’s (2008) examination of the evolution of the contemporary music market is a good example. Apart from doing longitudinal interviews, he also collects historical material including court documents, newspaper articles, press releases, and activist material. In a similar vein, Holt (2002) makes use of historical advertisements to show how certain brands developed into cultural icons by supplying brand myths that resolved cultural contradictions.

II. A sociologist’s charting of the topography of contradictions the ideology produces. The poststructuralist cultural history approach used by Karababa and Ger (2010) is closely related to sociological charting. They use their data to form a historical representation by recording historical events chronologically, and then attain a macroscopic view by studying the relations between the consumption, demographic, economic and social structures found in these representations.

III. A literary critic’s expedition into the culture that engages these contradictions: Literary critics typically use texts and images from selected cultural products. These products can be books, newspapers, magazines, movies, television shows, or web sites (Hollows 2002; 2003a; 2003b; Hommerberg 2011). The social constructions, discourses, ideologies, arguments, and narratives found in these texts can be analysed as representation of culture, and its inherent contradictions.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In this paper we argue that CCT lacks an integrated conceptual framework for the development of a market system from a mid-range perspective. We therefore, introduce a conceptual framework, which we refer to as Consumption Field Refinement (CFR), to represent such development. Central to our framework is the idea that the market system consists of several interlinked consumption fields and, as consumers develop a particular interest in a certain consumption activity (that has not yet been over-explored by other consumers) and strive for refinement within that area, the market subsystem—with the consumption field at its heart—evolves. However, in order for consumer interest to gain momentum and for refinement to occur, the consumption field requires refinement material from the firms/brand owners (e.g. increased product development both in width and depth); from media (e.g. expert knowledge, advocates); and from consumers (e.g. blog posts, recipes). The market system then evolves incrementally as consumption field after consumption field evolves due to consumer interest and refinement.

We believe that investigating CFR will have important implications for future research, as it will encourage a stronger focus on theoretical explanations and descriptions of meso-level consumption phenomena. We have suggested some concrete methods for researchers to work with meso-level conceptualizations, which we argue will complement prior macro-level conceptualizations derived from micro-level data. The CFR framework also implies that it is perhaps not only brands and services that are co-produced by firms and consumers but that these two entities, together with media, are co-producers in the development of new or existing market subsystems and industries.

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