

Liquid retail: cultural perspectives on marketplace transformation

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INTRODUCTION

Liquid Retail: Cultural Perspectives on Marketplace Transformation

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ABSTRACT

Inspired by Bauman's notion of 'liquidity', we problematize the socio-cultural dynamics taking place in contemporary retail. The notion of liquid retail enables researchers to untangle marketplace transformation and to highlight developments centred around markets and market actors that jointly transform each other. This introduction underlines, as a point of departure, recent developments in retailing that have been marked by the corrosion of fixity and boundaries. We provide a short synopsis of marketplace transformation and liquid retail, from a socio-cultural perspective, and summarize the papers included in this special issue.

KEYWORDS: Marketplace transformation; culture; liquid retail; Bauman, social change

This special issue features a set of reflections and a collection of papers that explore marketplace transformation as a process through which markets and market-actors mutually transform each other. The spotlight is set on retail, where despite persuasive calls to explore the socio-cultural make-up of retail contexts (Arnould, 2005; Miller 1995; Miller et al., 1998), and the growing body of interdisciplinary work on retail-related topics, such as fast fashion (Todeschini et al., 2017; Barnes and Lea- Greenwood, 2010), ethical and sustainable shopping (Geysmans, de Krom and Hustinx, 2017; Han, Seo and Ko, 2017; Mallard, 2015; Carrigan et al. 2004), themed shops (Rath et al., 2017; van Marrewijk and Maaik 2012; Kozinets et al., 2002), retail brand ideology (Botschen, and Wegerer, 2017; Borghini et al. 2009), retail formats and spaces (Castilhos and Dolbec, 2017; Elms, de Kervenoael and Hallsworth, 2016; Dawson and Mukoyama, 2014; Warnaby 2013), alternative retail (Delyth, and Gibson, 2017; Friends and Thompson, 2003; Gregson, Crewe and Brooks, 2002), service work and gender (Hanson, 2015; Pettinger 2004; du Gay 2004), materiality and retail objects (Hagberg, 2015;

Cochoy 2009; Arnold, Kozinets, and Handelman, 2001), or credit (Ossandón 2014), socio-cultural investigation of the highly malleable retail marketplaces remains scarce.

We use the notion of liquid retail as a way to highlight and problematize marketplace transformations in contemporary retailing. Although inspired by Zygmunt Bauman's (2000, 2007b, 2012) writing on liquid modernity, the adjective 'liquid' is not meant to designate a radical shift between the epoch of solidity and the emergent social order of liquid modernity (Rosa, 2013). Instead, it is meant to shed light on the nowadays common circumstances in which retail stakeholders navigate accelerated change and precarity (Bardhi et al. 2012b, Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Ritzer and Rey, 2016). Put differently, we deploy liquid retail as an open metaphor for intensified and complex retail dynamics, rather than a faithful subscription to Bauman's (2000, 2007a,b) framework of liquid modernity (see Herbert, Robert and Saucède's paper in this special issue for a closer application of Bauman's framework).

We are indeed witnessing intense retail dynamics, such as the concentration of market power in the hands of 'big-box' retail chains, the successful revival of local and alternative retail (e.g., small local stores, cooperatives), and the technology-spurred emergence (or revival) of ubiquitous and transient retail formations (e.g., online retail) (Chandler and Vargo, 2001; Harrison and Kjellberg, 2016). Intertwined with demographic, economic and cultural trends tied to globalisation, the aging of population, the economic and moral crises of capitalism, etc., liquid retail exerts a profound impact on social and economic geographies, consumption practices, and the structure and working conditions of today's 'workforce' (Friend and Thompson 2003; Scholz 2011; de Kervenoael, Elms and Hallsworth, 2014; Hallsworth et al., 2010; Wrigley and Dolega 2011).

Aligned with recent invitations in consumer culture theory and market studies to investigate markets as complex social systems (Giesler and Fischer 2017; Giesler and Thompson, 2016; Geiger et al., 2014; Geiger, Kjellberg, and Spencer, 2012.), enacted via collective and open processes of market formation (Cochoy, Trompette, and Araujo 2016; Cochoy, 2014; Callon and Muniesa. 2005), we approach retail market transformation as an indeterminate process that implicates diverse, at times surprising actors (de Kervenoael, Bisson and Palmer, 2015). It is thus paramount to suspend biases that prevent researchers from openly considering the role of varied actors (e.g., supply-centric accounts that overstate the role of corporate strategy in market change, or demand-centric accounts overstressing the role of consumers in shaping markets), and from attending to the interplay of macro, meso and micro-level transformations (Giesler and Fischer 2017; Bajde 2013).

In order to better capture liquid retail dynamics, we propose a constructivist-relational (CR) view on market transformation (see Cochoy, Trompette, and Araujo, 2016; Araujo, Kjellberg and Spencer, 2008) attentive to the relationship between macro-level changes (e.g., vicissitudes of political and normative discourses and ideologies, techno-economic (infra)structures) and meso- and micro-level activities of multiple actors (e.g., institution of new retail formations, changing consumption practices, political activism). Rather than separate between individual actors' subjective experiences and interpretations of change and 'real' objective transformations, the CR approach recognizes that experiences and interpretations of change tend to be culturally and socially structured and increasingly powerful as they begin to reverberate across multiple agents of marketplace change. Investigation of liquid retail thus begins by unfolding how diverse actors (e.g., consumers, consumer representatives, retail managers, corporate and alternative retailers, financial investors) experience, make sense of, deal with, and instigate social and economic change. Furthermore, these actors and the collectives they comprise can be profoundly reshaped in the process, and the emergent practices and techno-social arrangements open new possibilities for change and imposing new constraints on the actors' capacity to manage and instigate change (Cochoy 2008 and 2015; Hagberg, Kjellberg, and Cochoy, 2017).

The first paper in this special issue takes this path of investigation by exploring the (r)evolution of retail formats in the context of a Swedish retailer. The paper addresses two core theoretical issues. First, the problems of extant theorization of retail formats as relatively fixed, stable entities with clearly distinguishable boundaries and logically designed features; and second the problem of conceiving retail formats as abstract entities disentangled from specific retailers. These issues are tackled by advancing the concept of retail formation as "the activities and configuration processes involved in the formation of retail formats". Retail formations are thus conceptualized as configurations that are continually in the making, shaped by a variety of actors, and fundamentally shaping these and other actors.

Drawing upon actor-network theory and an ethnographic study of the emergence of e-commerce in Sweden, the authors intentionally refrain from assuming a priori what or who causes retail change, or that change has to occur in a given sequence. Hagberg and Fuentes' analysis of event surrounding the Swedish retailer NetOnNet uncovers three instances of retail formation processes through which the respective retail network and its constitution and capacities change. The paper argues that retail formations are recurrently enacted through

dynamic processes which can be initiated by various actors, do not necessarily follow a logical direction, and sometimes produce surpassing results.

The second paper, applies Bauman's liquid modernity framework to investigate the context of French retailing. More specifically, the author propose that Bauman's ideas provide a fitting analytical framework that can help organize and explain the experiences, reflections and tactics advanced by French retail professionals. Based on projective interviews with these 'elite professionals', Herbert, Robert and Saucède proposed that the French food retail industry is currently experiencing what Bauman calls an interregnum – a liminal period between an inadequate and dissolving old order and an uncertain new one. The managers experience recent developments in food retailing as a response to the crisis of the high-volume, low-price mass-retail model, conceived as a quintessence of 'solid' modernity since the 1960s.

This paper elaborates on the idea that retailers in both traditional mass-retail and alternative retail contexts, position themselves as agents who can, through experimentation and adaptation, tackle social and economic issues as entrepreneurial mediators between deterritorialized global institutions, weakening public authorities, and local businesses and individuals. Retailers thus envision an important role for themselves as renovators of territorial cohesion (e.g., combating disparities in food provisioning) and food landscapes (e.g., assorted, local, safe, healthy and socially-responsible food provisions). Such agendas are pursued by "pointillist" experimentation and diversification through expanded networking with an increasing variety of local and alternative stakeholders, to the alleged benefit of the French consumer. However, history and recent analyses of 'soft capitalism' (Thrift 2005), suggest a careful examination of these arguably democratic and public-benefiting undertakings.

The final paper takes us back to Sweden to investigate a retail context fundamental to the Nordic retail scene: cooperative retail. Ingrid Stigzelius, focuses our attention on the processes of political reordering through practices of consumer representation. Representation is conceptualized as an outcome of processes of agencing and concerning, through which consumers become sorted, capabilized, engaged and ultimately transformed into political agents of change.

The study of a Swedish consumer cooperative's efforts to reengage its member-owners by redesigning its "member democracy", highlights the work of multiple actors in producing "consumer voice" by instating particular visions of idealized consumer participation and gradually realizing them. Stigzelius highlights the vital role of (s)elect

consumers (i.e., member/owner representatives) as mediators between the ideal and the real, and translators of multiple voices into the aggregated voice of the consumers. Consumer representatives themselves are likewise produced through the process of agencing-concerning (i.e., selected, equipped, engaged and enacted) shaped by the changes taking place in the broader environment (e.g., decrease of civic engagement, increased market pressures) and the strategies of cooperatives responding to these changes.

In short, all three papers show that change is a complex and uncertain process in which social, economic, political and technological filaments incessantly intertwine. Exploring the colourful fabric of liquid retail and the precarious constellations of actors that give shape to retail transformations (and are inevitably shaped by them), represent an enduring challenge to all who are concerned with the metamorphosis of contemporary society. Above all, this special issue demonstrates that accelerated retail marketplace transformation challenges taken-for-granted concepts, such as political consumer, retail format and mass retail. Problematizing and better conceptualizing the constitution of retail actors, retail practices, and retail arrangements, is a vital step in advancing a socio-cultural understanding of markets.

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