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Smaniotto, Cristiano; Emontspool, Julie; Askegaard, Søren

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Consumption Logistics and the Ordering of Market Systems

Cristiano Smaniotto (corresponding author), Aarhus University, cristiano@btech.au.dk
Julie Emontspool, University of Southern Denmark
Søren Askegaard, University of Southern Denmark

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Abstract

This paper argues that consumption logistics are fundamental modes of ordering markets. Constructivist Market Studies (CMS) and Market System Dynamics (MSD) approaches improved our understanding of respectively the practical and symbolic processes of market organization. On this backdrop, previous research has predominantly framed logistics as a practical performance of this organization. Conversely, we argue that logistical performances are as much practical as they are symbolic. Drawing on both CMS and MSD research, we therefore conceptualize consumption logistics as the system of interrelated practices ordering the heterogeneous entities of consumption in space and time. Put differently, by integrating market and consumption practices, consumption logistics recursively (per)form the context of markets, i.e. the situated conditions affording subjects the possibility to consume and objects to be consumed within specific markets. Our theorization brings forward the complex practical-symbolic ordering of markets, with implications for discussions of spaces, subjects and meanings of market phenomena.

Keywords

consumption, consumption logistics, context, markets, market systems, ordering, practical, symbolic
Introduction

The context of market phenomena has gained in significance through Market System Dynamics (MSD) research (Giesler and Fischer, 2016). However, scholarly debate on what constitutes ‘context’ continues unabated. Since Askegaard and Linnet’s (2011) critique of the entrenchment of CCT studies on consumers’ lived experiences, researchers have debated what ‘context’ is and how it should be approached. While some propose investigating the macro-structures shaping social phenomena (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011; Earley, 2014), others suggest studying the situated condition of social order (Woermann, 2017) by looking at how context is made in practice (Bajde, 2013; Hill et al., 2014).

Inspired by these latter practical approaches, we define context as a “performative social situation . . . a parcel of socially constructed time-space, [where] ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’ are aligned in particular ways which provide particular orientations to action” (Thrift, 1996: 41–43).

Drawing on MSD and the neighbouring field of Constructivist Market Studies (Harrison and Kjellberg, 2016), we suggest that a set of contextual dynamics implicated in the constitution of markets has only been partially analysed: their logistical organization. Despite the recognition that logistical infrastructures are important constituents of socio-technical market arrangements (Çalışkan and Callon, 2010), they only made a fleeting appearance in MSD research (see Martin and Schouten, 2014). The mundane and practical character of logistics may be the reason why these infrastructures did not find much space in a field (i.e. MSD) interested in the “meaning-making” processes of market creation (Nøjgaard and Bajde, 2020). At the same time, they have enjoyed some popularity in a field (i.e. CMS) concerned with the “practical workings of markets” (Harrison and Kjellberg, 2016). Indeed, CMS scholars have been investigating for some time how logistical market devices—such as shopping carts (Cochoy, 2008) and bags (Hagberg, 2016)—shape market exchanges. Building on these CMS insights,
we argue that logistics is far more than a performance of the practical organization of markets, as it also contributes to the institution of a symbolic order of consumption.

The practical-symbolic function of logistics is most evident in connection to challenges posed to our consumption by sustainability concerns: avoiding plastic packaging, turning to reusable products, travelling by bicycle or public transportation rather than by car, embracing access-based services are examples of logistical challenges whose implications are both practical (as they require a material, spatial and temporal reorganization of everyday life) and symbolic (as they require a reappraisal of identities, values, ideologies and discourses). To offer an example in line with the spirit of the times, the Covid-19 pandemic striking the world at the moment of writing has prompted discussions on whether single-use containers are more hygienic than reusable containers, with companies like Starbucks refusing to serve coffee in customers’ cups (Evans, 2020). Biological explanations of the relative safety of the two types of containers is beyond the scope of our argument. Yet this example suggests the deep (and usually, neglected) involvement of logistics in the symbolic institution of a “system of purity” (Douglas, 2003). With it, the example also implies that in order to successfully introduce new logistical arrangements (as those mentioned above) that aim at decreasing the impact of consumption on the planet, researchers, companies and policy-makers alike must understand the complex practical-symbolic ordering (i.e. the recursive processes of organization) characterizing logistics and, thus, consumption phenomena. Therefore, we ask: how do logistics contribute to the practical and symbolic ordering of consumption phenomena?

In answering this question, the present paper introduces the theory of consumption logistics. As point of departure, we draw on CMS and Actor-Network Theory studies which have recently investigated consumers’ transportation of goods and its impact on shopping exchanges through the lens of consumer logistics (Brembeck et al., 2015; Calvignac and Cochoy, 2016; Cochoy et al., 2015;
Hagberg, 2016; Hansson, 2014). We expand the focus of these studies by re-embedding transportation into a system of consumer logistics. In fact, consumer logistics was originally conceived as the system of decision-making activities (of location, handling and storage, inventory, transportation, and communication) involved in processing goods for the purpose of consumption (Granzin and Bahn, 1989). We requalify consumer logistics as the system of practices that shape the flows of consumers and goods from acquisition to consumption and disposal—where practices are modes of ordering heterogeneous items into coherent sets (Gherardi, 2006).

We further propose means of logistics as basic components ensuring the systemic character of logistic practices. Taking inspiration from Ritzer’s (1999) “new means of consumption” describing the general facilitation of consumption activities through, for example, credit cards, the Internet and shopping malls, we define means of logistics as all objects, devices, and technologies that shape flows of consumers and goods in market systems. These range from means facilitating global circulation, such as Euro pallets and cargo containers (Birtchnell and Urry, 2015); retail distribution, such as shelves, displays, packaging, and bags (Cochoy, 2010; Hagberg, 2016); and individual consumers’ transportation and movement, such as bicycles, strollers, cars (Brembeck et al., 2015; Hansson, 2014) and even bodies (Calvignac and Cochoy, 2016; Cochoy et al., 2015). The concept of means of logistics relates the flows of individual consumers and goods organized by consumer logistic practices to the broader logistical organization of consumption at the market level. For example, the role of packaging as a means of logistics becomes evident when, in response to the current focus on plastic pollution, “new” market forms are proposed—such as package-free retailing. In package-free retailing, (the absence of) packaging impacts both the flows of individual consumers and their goods (in terms of when, where and what to purchase), and the overall organization of the retail market (in terms of types of saleable goods, their supply, and the design of the store).
These means integrate consumer logistics into a broader system of consumption logistics, i.e. the system of interrelated practices of location, transportation, and communication that order the heterogeneous entities of consumption in space and time (see example of packaging here above). Consumption logistics are meta-practices which organize the enactment of what we normally refer to as consumption practices (e.g., drinking to-go coffee logistically relies on the use of disposable cups, the removal of which requires a re-organization of the elements of such practice). In this sense, consumption logistics are modes of ordering (Law, 1994) that recursively produce the context of consumption practices by (per)forming the situated conditions that afford subjects the possibility to consume and objects to be consumed.

We develop the argument in three parts. First, we relate current approaches to consumer logistics to the literature of shopping in which they are discussed. Here, we introduce a taxonomy categorizing existing studies of shopping according to the social ontology which they adopt. We explain how the different ontological positions lead to a disentanglement of the practical and symbolic processes constituting shopping (a phenomenon we call “decontextualization”). In the second part, we advocate for a tighter dialogue between practical and symbolic perspectives, so that the complexity of market phenomena can be retained. Accordingly, we introduce consumption logistics as a perspective that accounts for the co-constitution of the material and symbolic relations organizing markets. In the third part, we tie our discussion to examples of (un)sustainable consumption challenges to illustrate the contribution of consumption logistics at the edge of MSD and CMS perspectives on market systems. Specifically, we relate the material spatio-temporal organization of consumption logistics to the constitution of consumer subjectivities (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014; Karababa and Ger, 2011) and the formation of meanings attached to consumption practices (Coskuner-Balli and Ertimur, 2017; Sandikci and Ger, 2009).
The decontextualization of shopping

This section introduces a taxonomy of shopping research categorizing existing studies of shopping according to the adopted social ontology. We identify three perspectives which reflect differences in the studies’ treatment of agency and materiality: the cognitive, symbolic and practice perspective (see Table 1). The taxonomy is by no means intended to be exhaustive or universal but to foster reflection on the decontextualization of shopping. The term “decontextualization” does not mean to diminish the contribution of previous research. On the contrary, the next pages recognize the success of the three perspectives in advancing knowledge of different dynamics of shopping. However, as they tend to focus on either cognitive, symbolic or practical dynamics, explanations of shopping emerge as “decontextualized” (or disentangled) from other constitutive contextual relations. As mentioned in the introduction and explained more in detail in the next section, we see merit in integrating the different perspectives to enhance our understanding of market phenomena such as shopping.

Table 1. A taxonomy of shopping research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of shopping</th>
<th>Social ontology</th>
<th>Decontextualization</th>
<th>Illustrative references</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shopping is a <em>cognitive</em> activity occurring in the consumer’s mind.</td>
<td>Agency is a subjective property, accounted for in terms of consumer choice. Materiality provides the background to consumer choice.</td>
<td>The consumer subject is disembodied and disembedded from the broader sociocultural context.</td>
<td>Alba et al., 1997; Argo et al., 2005; Baker et al., 2002; Inman et al., 2009; Mattila and Wirtz, 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping is an <em>expressive</em> activity resulting from</td>
<td>Agency is intersubjective and accounted for in terms of symbolic meanings stem from an intangible cultural universe that</td>
<td></td>
<td>Crockett and Wallendorf, 2004; Griffin et al., 2000; Hamlett et al., 2008;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Shopping as a cognitive activity

The first category considers shopping as the outcome of decision-making processes, hence a cognitive activity. Focusing on how individuals exert agency through their choices, these studies investigate how individual goals, motives, and characteristics shape in-store choices (Inman et al., 2009), choices of shopping channel (Alba et al., 1997), choices of alternative stores (Rhee and Bell, 2002; Konus et al., 2008), participation in shopping chores (Roy Dholakia, 1999), and the effectiveness of promotions (Lee and Ariely, 2006).

The store environment is appreciated for its influence on customers’ mental states. Environmental cues provide stimuli affecting value perception (Baker et al., 2002), in-store behaviours (Spangenberg et al., 1996), and customer satisfaction (Mattila and Wirtz, 2001). Furthermore, mental states are affected by the presence of other customers (Argo et al., 2005), the presence (Chandon et al., 2009) and absence (Fitzsimons, 2000) of products on shelves, the graphic appeal (Orth and Crouch, 2014) and informational content (Guyader et al., 2017) of in-store signs.
While these studies significantly advance knowledge about customer experience, they decontextualize the overall activity of shopping in two ways. First, the subject’s action (i.e. choice) is narrowed to the abstract context of the customer mind. The material world provides a background on which shopping unfolds without affecting it in any strict sense. Yet, cognitive activity always unfolds through the performance of a bodily practice (Schatzki, 2002). Thus, a subject’s action is always an interaction between the entities of the spatial configuration of which the body is part (Yakhlef, 2015). The body acts as the fulcrum between the material and perceptual worlds (Yakhlef, 2015); without the body there would be no customer experience, let alone shopping. Second, this category examines customer choice independently of its sociocultural context. The only recognizable social relationship is the connection among categories of individuals identified as customers and retailers. Yet as systemic approaches suggest, shopping is an entanglement of broader sociocultural relations institutionalized in market systems. Therefore, while the consumer subject is an important component of shopping, he is always embodied and embedded within a material, social, and cultural context.

**Shopping as symbolic expression**

The second category situates shopping within cultural meaning systems. Led by Miller’s (1998) canonical theory of shopping as a devotional ritual reproducing kinship, these studies examine shopping as a *symbolic expression* of sociocultural relations, such as national culture values (Griffin et al., 2000), ethnic identities (Hamlett et al., 2008), class capital (Hanser, 2010), political ideology (Crockett and Wallendorf, 2004), gender (Sandlin and Maudlin, 2012), and race (Pittman, 2017).

While these accounts contribute to a deeper understanding of the symbolic logics of consumer culture, they separate the symbolic and material dimensions of shopping—possibly influenced by interactionism’s tendency to separate the social and material realms, so that the first serves as an
explanation for the latter (Schatzki, 2010). In this second category, objects become symbolic representations of human meanings, which seemingly do not possess pragmatic properties (Bajde, 2013; Woermann, 2017). For example, “rotting fruit, green meat, and shelves without unit pricing” of ghetto stores signify racial inequalities (Crockett and Wallendorf, 2004: 525), yet how the materiality of these objects is producing inequality by affecting shopping and consumption practices is not addressed. Therefore, materiality is taken as a reflection of a higher social and cultural order (Woermann, 2017), but is not considered in its role in the production of contextual orientations, i.e. the agency embedded in situated material configurations. This view is problematic because it denies the power of objects in shaping consumer actions, as explained in the next section.

**Shopping as an equipped practice**

The third category investigates how the *equipment* of shopping scripts its practice. The focus of these studies shifts from individual choice and its expression toward action. They show that shopping is a collective activity (Cochoy, 2008) done jointly by humans and non-humans. Shopping carts (Cochoy, 2008), packages, magic doors, aisles, check-out cashiers (Cochoy, 2010), shopping bags (Hagberg, 2016) and smartphones (Fuentes et al., 2017) are entities endowed with agency, as they affect consumers’ capacity to shop. Some studies in this category have even opened the door of the store to look at the “equipments which help consumers go from the store and back home with recent purchases” (Hansson, 2014: 73). They find that mobility practices influence shopping. For instance, strollers hinder parents throughout the journey, but also provide carrying capacity for over-shopping (Brembeck et al., 2015; Hansson, 2014); shoes influence elderly consumers’ choice of transportation means and shopping routes (Brembeck et al., 2015); in-store self-service technologies affect carrying practices (Hagberg, 2016).
These studies successfully foreground the active role of materiality in shopping. Yet they show a tendency to separate technical and functional processes (the material) from cultural processes of meaning attribution (the cultural). That is, when meaning-attribution is discussed, it is usually rendered as a human act of ascribing significance to the (socio)technical associations constituting shopping. Consider the following examples taken from two excellent analyses of the materiality of shopping. While studying mobility practices, Hansson (2014) notes that “strollers […] definitely have symbolic as well as mobility value” (84); or that when involved in mobility practices “consumers draw upon a culturally and normative embedded reservoir of practices and social expectations as well as the material environment” (88). And see also this passage from Cochoy’s (2008) work on the shopping cart:

one should not only focus on “meaning” (the “hermeneutic” or “cultural” dimensions of persons and things), but also on “action” (what the same people and things make and shape, or help us to shape and make) (Latour 2005a). In other words, the mundane, down-to-earth, rational, functional, material and calculative aspects of consumption deserve as much attention from consumer sciences as their intellectual, ritual, cultural or anthropological counterparts (39).

These examples imply that symbolic and functional processes exist independently from one another, similarly to what was discussed for the previous category. The difference is that pragmatic perspectives do not give precedence to one process over another in their explanations of the ontological constitution of social phenomena. Yet we are left wondering how meaning (the symbolic) and action (the material) are co-constituted.

In fact, meaning and action originate together. More specifically, the function of a tool enabling action is itself a cultural construct (Askegaard and Firat, 1997). As Castoriadis (1987) underlines, \textit{legein} (classifying, designating) and \textit{teukhein} (assembling, making, constructing) refer to each other in a circular process. The “toolishness” of the tool is already inscribed in a symbolic imaginary, since it
not only represents a general category (the “tool”), but also because the tool can produce what is not: an imagined finality. The “mundane, down-to-earth, rational, functional, material and calculative aspects” (Cochoy, 2008: 39) are as cultural as their “cultural” equivalents, and meaning can therefore not stand alongside action, function, or materiality since it originates in (inter)action. The difference between the symbolic and functional characters of shopping is therefore merely an analytical one. Yet examining these characters separately might hinder a deeper understanding of shopping. That is why we need a theory accounting for the co-constitution of the material and the symbolic.

**Consumption logistics: Ordering complex market phenomena**

The taxonomy above suggests that previous research decontextualized shopping by disentangling either cognitive, symbolic or material dynamics from one another. This manoeuvre reduced the complexity of shopping, thus contributing to reveal fundamental subtleties of why and how people shop. Yet it also concealed other subtleties—such as the co-constitution of meaning and matter. Reducing complexity is the legacy of the scientific project of modernity which aims at producing orderly explanations of phenomena (Law, 1994). Complexity threatens to destroy such explanations by bringing in disorder and chaos, that is, everything which does not conform to our accounts of an explanatory order of things. Following the normative tendency of modern research institutions, researchers tend to rule complexity out in favour of focused (yet partial) explanations of how specific elements constitute social phenomena. Yet unfortunately, phenomena are always complex and messy (Law, 1994).

The risk associated with precluding complexity from our explanations concerns being impotent before change. Market phenomena (such as shopping) are complex as they largely define the lifestyle (i.e. mode of living) of modern consumer cultures. Thereby, changes in market phenomena always entail changes in the complex of symbolic and material associations defining this lifestyle. The Covid-
19 pandemic hitting the world as we write offers a case in point. Namely, the market disruptions induced by institutional restrictions on mobility and exchange to combat the virus have brought changes in all spheres of social life, from production to leisure, from public to private activities, from scientific projects to burial rituals. In this situation, modern societies are impotent, as they cannot but passively adapt to these changes. In the future, environmental disruptions could likewise impose (even more) burdensome changes on modern lifestyles, unless we learn to deal with the complexity of social phenomena to implement pre-emptive changes.

To appreciate the complexity of social phenomena, we must recognize their plural, incomplete and provisional character. That is, we must recognize them as ordering processes, rather than ordered performances (Law, 1994). Accordingly, we draw on the concept of mode of ordering as a “way of imputing coherences or self-reflexive ‘logics’ that . . . speak through, act and recursively organize the full range of social materials” (Law, 1994: 109). Modes of ordering recursively organize the conditions of social phenomena through the enactment of those same phenomena. Practically (but not analytically, as we shall detail below while introducing consumption logistics), they are indistinguishable from the phenomenon which they order. For example, shopping organizes products wrapped in packages, means of transport used for carrying, store and kitchen shelves. The constant arrangement of this material infrastructure (and related practices) defines the practice of shopping itself. What would “to shop” mean if we took away the packaging—and the bags, the credit card, the bicycle, the refrigerator?

To study modes of ordering amounts to analysing social practices. These are themselves “modes of ordering heterogeneous items into a coherent set” (Gherardi, 2006: 36). The items of practices are heterogeneous because they include manifold entities (try to list all the entities, humans and non-humans, that partake in shopping practices). Practices impute coherence to those entities by arranging them in (more or less) stable sets of associations, which are recursively reproduced over time.
and which give them meaning. These associations form the texture of what we come to recognize as social structures and orders.

**Revisiting consumer logistics**

We suggest that the associations between the heterogeneous entities constituting shopping and consumption phenomena are recursively ordered by a system of interrelated practices of *consumption logistics*. To build our argument, we first draw on recent studies of *consumer* logistics (Brembeck et al., 2015; Hagberg, 2016; Hansson, 2014). As explained in our taxonomy above, these studies offer an important contribution by showing how consumer transportation of goods—materialized in the relation between retail technologies (e.g. packaging, plastic bags) and consumer means of transportation (e.g. bicycles, public transport)—shape shopping exchanges. However, as noted in the original formulation of consumer logistics, transportation is part of a broader system of logistics that shapes flows of consumers and goods from acquisition to consumption and final disposal (Granzin and Bahn, 1989). We then draw on Granzin and Bahn (1989) to expand recent studies’ focus on transportation and restore the systemic character of consumer logistics.

In particular, we revisit the five functional subsystems comprising consumer logistics—location, inventory, handling and storage, transportation, and communication (Granzin and Bahn, 1989). While each of these subsystems originally constituted a decision-making unit, we redefine them as sets of practices. As explained below, to be consistent with our practice perspective we reorganize the original categories by placing inventory and handling and storage under the more general practice of location. Our consumer logistics is thus defined as the set of practices of location, transportation, and communication, affecting the spatial and temporal flows of consumers and goods.
Location refers to the “placement in time and space of consumers and their artefacts” (Granzin and Bahn, 1989: 95). A house is an example of a semi-permanent location of consumption. From a practice perspective location is always simultaneously spatially and temporally constituted (Thrift, 1996). Inventory—the management of the availability of goods through time (e.g. consumers balance present stocks with future consumption projects)—pertains to the temporal constitution of consumption location. Whereas handling and storage—the placement of objects in space (e.g. consumers store food in kitchen cabinets)—pertains to its spatial constitution. Thus, while originally conceived as distinct categories, we include inventory and handling and storage under the more general practice of location.

Besides the house, other types of location may include stores and waste disposal sites. However, in these locations consumers do not have an active role in the performance of inventory and storage, because these are part of systems of retail and waste management logistics. For example, consumers can influence a store inventory through their choices but do not participate in making the inventory; consumers dispose of their items at disposal sites but are not responsible for placing the containers. Shopping and disposal locations are thereby spaces where consumer logistics meet business logistics. For instance, the spatial and material layout of supermarkets results from the organization of retail practices. These practices presuppose and prefigure the consumer performance within the supermarket location by scripting storage practices through shelves and shopping carts (Cochoy, 2010). Hence, retail and consumer logistics practices of storage co-exist within market locations.

Transportation practices connect different locations and define the movement of consumers and goods between those locations. While transportation is a kind of handling and a temporary storage, it works as a node of connection that makes the interaction between different locations possible, giving consumer logistics its systemic character. As previous studies show, transportation is an essential part
of shopping practices and impacts the definition of certain types of consumers (e.g. family and the elderly) (Brembeck et al., 2015; Hansson, 2014).

*Communication* practices characterize the systemic nature of consumer logistics by ensuring coordination between and within the sets. For example, shopping lists coordinate between current and future stocks (within the set of inventory), but they also coordinate between inventory and storage practices (between sets). Communication practices such as making a shopping list may be tacit (e.g. glancing at the items left in a cabinet) or manifest (e.g. communication between the shopper and other family members). Furthermore, consumer logistics communication also mixes with business logistics communication. For instance, a store implementing a promotion with the purpose of minimizing residual stocks also impacts consumer logistics coordination when consumers are drawn to buy more of the same product.

**Introducing consumption logistics**

The practices of consumer logistics form a system shaping the flows of individual consumers and goods from acquisition to consumption and disposal. Crucial to the sustainment of these flows is a basic material infrastructure that we call *means of logistics*, which identifies every tool, object, artefact, device and body that shapes, channels, directs, or prefigures the spatial and temporal flows of consumers and goods—such as packages, shopping carts, refrigerators, cabinets, containers, smartphones, roads, cars, bicycles, bodies. Means of logistics constitute the fundamental material scaffolding affecting flows of consumers and goods throughout the consumer logistics system. For example, plastic bags allow consumers to move several products from the store to home in one trip. Means of logistics also co-exist as an ecology of artefacts linked by different degrees of interdependence—plastic bags function better when certain products are wrapped in packages (e.g.
oats), which allow consumers to efficiently store and retrieve products from kitchen cabinets. However, packages do not facilitate carrying products by bicycle unless they are coupled with other types of containers, such as bags.

Means of logistics connect the system of individual consumer logistics practices to a broader system organizing consumption at the market level. For example, packages facilitate consumer carrying and also function as a fundamental element in the organization of traditional retail practices. Consequently, the removal of packaging not only affects individual consumer flows (e.g. when and where to shop without packaging) but also problematizes the overall organization of consumption (e.g. the organization of a package-free retail market). Therefore, consumer logistics and their means are connected in a broader systemic whole that goes beyond flows of individual consumers and goods: the system of consumption logistics.

We define consumption logistics as the system of interrelated practices ordering the heterogeneous entities of consumption in space and time. Consumption logistics function as modes of ordering the interactions and enactment of what we commonly refer to as consumption practices. For example, the practice of drinking to-go coffee is logistically organized by a system of vendors, coffee machines and disposable cups that allow consumers to sip their coffee while walking or travelling by train. While consumer logistics refers to the logistical practices carried out by individual consumers; consumption logistics refers to the logistical organization of consumption at the market level. In other words, the difference between the practices of consumer and those of consumption logistics is not in nature, but in kind. Hence, the types of practices comprising consumption logistics are the same as those of consumer logistics: location, transportation and communication. Indeed, the logistical organization of the to-go coffee market requires: the availability of coffee and consumers in different places of the city and at the different times (location); the transport of coffee to these locations by
business carriers, and from these locations by consumers (transportation); the coordination between the activities of coffee shops, business carriers and coffee producers, and between the activities of coffee shops and consumers (communication). Put differently, consumption logistics are a system of meta-practices ensuring the integration of market and consumption activities. Through this integration, consumption logistics perform the situated conditions of consumption practices affording subjects the possibility to consume and objects to be consumed within a market (e.g. the case of to-go coffee drinking).

This perspective suggests a reinterpretation of the systemic nature of consumption. Figure 1 illustrates a generic consumption system, identified as locations of acquisition (shopping) in the store, use (the act of consuming) in the house, and disposal at the disposal site.¹ These locations (i.e. placements in space and time) are connected in a complex systemic whole by practices of transportation and communication, which are fundamental to the movement and coordination of flows of subjects and objects between and within locations (identified as arrows in Figure 1). Thereby, consumption logistics emphasize the fluid nature of consumption as flows of materials and meanings that continuously change through space and time, in contrast to systemic perspectives focusing on consumption as systems of multiple actors bound to specific locations.

[Insert “Figure 1: A system of consumption logistics” here.]

This perspective bears epistemological and methodological implications. For what concerns epistemology, consumption logistics engenders a wider notion of actors, practices, spaces, and objects (to name but a few) than that provided by current market systems studies. A thorough elaboration of the consequences of this wider approach is beyond the scope of this paper, but we would like to relate our notion of consumption logistics to Law’s (2004) discussion of method assemblages. The examples

¹ The figure is not an accurate representation but only a sketch of a consumption system.
highlighted by Law draw a broader portrait of social processes, much like the ones we suggest here (see also Cochoy and Mallard, 2017). Law’s discussion represents a challenge to the standard Euro-American method assemblage which assumes definiteness, singularity, constancy and object passivity. In line with current market system approaches, ANT and assemblage theory, he stresses the performativity of scientific method and asks “which methods would be adapted to a world that included and knew itself as tide, flux and general unpredictability” (Law, 2004: 7). Thus, we adopt Law’s epistemology of method assemblage exactly because it does not produce neat and definite universes of phenomena, as our suggested phenomenon of consumption logistics is in constant flux and with uncertain boundary conditions. Consequently, the question of which actors are significant for consumption logistics—which means of transport, locations and settings to consider in a study—does not have a definite answer. This will be a matter of which allegory—the kind of knowledge produced—one wants to present to the critical reader (Law, 2004).

In line with this epistemological position, the following methodological considerations should be taken as suggestions, rather than dogmatic precepts. Fundamentally, studies of consumption logistics should tell a story about the relational encounters organizing consumption in space and time. Such stories should provide naïve thick descriptions. Thick to be able to portray the complexity of logistic relations. Naïve to avoid a priori imputations of agency (the “cause” of the flows) to specific actors and, instead, consider all actors equally. This does not however mean that studies of consumption logistics should consider every and any actor. In fact, the concept of means of logistics offers a starting point for analyses of consumption logistics. Yet the exploration, identification, description and classification of these means and their relations is an achievement still lying ahead.

One (possible) methodological question is: how do we ensure the thickness of description? Ethnographic observations suitably serve the purpose of following the complex flows of people, things
and symbols between and within locations of consumption implied by our framework. Previous studies showed that multi-sited ethnographies of the kind “follow the thing” (Marcus, 1995) are useful for capturing flows between locations (see Hagberg, 2016; Hansson, 2014). Future research has plenty of means of logistics, locations and paths to consider. For example, following the movement of a plastic bottle up and down logistics streams may generate insights that can help us frame the relevance of plastic for current consumption. Furthermore, as logistics flows unfold also within locations, ethnographies of consumption logistics have reason to be circumstantially local (single-site), while attempting to understand broader systemic dynamics (Marcus, 1995). There are a lot of spatial and temporal flows of things within locations where storage and inventory occur. How do things arrive and leave these places? What determines their movement? How do means of logistics enter relations that eventually create frustration or relieve anxieties with regards to the flows of goods? How do they shape patterns of everyday consumption?

Another methodological implication concerns the observance of the principle of ontological symmetry to avoid a priori imputations of agency. Visually-assisted methodologies may render a symmetric account of human—non-human interactions (Calvignac and Cochoy, 2016). However, an object (device, thing, body) is through practice, that is, through the relations of a practice performance in which it is involved (Gherardi, 2006). The relations foregrounded through our methodological choices, then, enact a specific reality (Law, 2004). If thick descriptions of consumption logistics were only based on visual aids without being supported by, say, interviews, they would ignore a set of discursive relations upholding logistical arrangements. This does not mean that analyses of consumption logistics must include discursive relations; but that researchers must be mindful of the “ontological politics” of research, i.e. that there is never one truth about social phenomena and that different method assemblages enact different (logistic) realities (Law, 2004).
Discussion

This section illustrates relevant applications of a consumption logistics perspective. As modes of ordering, consumption logistics organize the heterogeneous entities of consumption phenomena in coherent (that is, meaningful) spatio-temporal arrangements (e.g. consumer-and-shopping-cart-within-the-store-during-opening-hours). To study consumption logistics means to study the recursive processes generating these arrangements. From this perspective, actors, discourses and devices comprising an arrangement are not the cause of consumption phenomena, but rather an effect of these. And as an effect of phenomena, arrangements and their constitutive entities are always simultaneously material and symbolic (how can we discern the material from the symbolic in a description of the arrangement “consumer-and-shopping-cart-within-the-store-during-opening-hours”?)

The following paragraphs elaborate on the implications of consumption logistics for the analysis of subjects, objects and meanings of consumption, reflecting the relational configurations that, as argued in the outlined taxonomy, have been decontextualized. We situate these implications in three current discussions around market dynamics: the spatial (and temporal) organization of markets; the constitution of consumer subjects; the formation of consumption meanings. In particular, we suggest that an increased focus on consumption logistics may generate new insights on the (un)sustainability of modern consumption.

The spatial and temporal organization of shopping and consumption

Consumption logistics contribute to spatial discussions in market systems research (Castilhos and Dolbec, 2018; Castilhos et al., 2017; Chatzidakis et al., 2017) by framing space as flows of things and meanings rather than as a static assemblage of entities. From this perspective, consumption implies that things and bodies are constantly transferred between locations which are themselves always changing.
Buying, selling, throwing away, cooking, cleaning are all practices for which things are placed, moved, transferred, replaced and transformed. Hence, consumption entails a complex spatio-temporal organization keeping things in motion, ensured by consumption logistics.

As environmental concerns are leading us to rethinking the means of logistics supporting our consumption, consumption logistics can help us focus on the spatial (re)organization of (un)sustainable consumption flows. Package-free stores and products are gaining prominence in the battle against plastic waste. Mobile application technologies (e.g. Too Good To Go) are employed to divert the trajectory of food towards waste. Internet platforms are used as exchange sites to elongate objects’ lifespan. How are these (and other) changes in means of logistics affecting flows and trajectories of things, while diverting them from less sustainable paths? What kind of re-organization of daily practices do these changes imply? How do these changes affect consumption at the systemic level, i.e. the connections within the system of consumption logistics (see figure 1)? How are these changes impacting basic practices of social life, such as family? The manifestation of familial love through shopping (Miller, 1998), for instance, would not be possible without the set of related means of logistics (e.g., shopping carts, bags, strollers) allowing for a caring behaviour comprising practices of transportation, storage, inventory, and communication that characterize shopping and consumption spaces. How are environmental concerns and the introduction of more sustainable forms of logistics challenging the spatiality of social relationships?

Furthermore, consumption logistics entail the organization of temporal flows. From a consumption logistics perspective time is a recursive unfolding of relations. While systemic perspectives usually consider market development over time (Giesler and Fischer, 2016), research focusing on market development of time (as done for constructs like “consumer” or “brand”) could generate further insights into the unsustainable ordering of consumption. For instance, consumption
logistics are central to the temporal coordination of different market actors. Besides helping consumers coordinate cooking activities, freezers (Hand and Shove, 2007) and packages (Yngfalk, 2016) temporalize consumption by regulating the rhythmicity of shopping and the transformation of food into waste. Similarly, consumers juggling with hectic lifestyles use refrigerators to prolong the lifespan of food, yet without necessarily diverting it from its path towards the bin (Evans, 2012). Furthermore, consumer inventory practices coordinate household stocks levels, shaping future consumption projects and regulating consumer access to the marketplace. These examples suggest that, especially in connection with issues of waste, the (un)sustainability of consumption flows is a matter of temporal organization, as much as spatial. The introduction of more sustainable practices is likely to impact such temporal organization (e.g. how does the removal of packaging influence consumer coordination of weekly shopping routines?). Hence, future research should examine how consumption logistics institute temporal patterns that hinder (or facilitate) the adoption of sustainable consumption practices.

**Constraining choice, expressing subjectivity**

Consumption logistics promote an embodied perspective on consumer subjectivity. Inspired by Yakhlef (2015), we suggest that MSD research is still dominated by disembodied consumer subjects, predominantly represented as minds, instead of bodies (proven by a preference for discursive methods). But how does the materiality of the body partake in market dynamics? From a practice perspective, the subject exists only in the situated enactment of a practice—that is, embodied and embedded in a specific location. Building on this insight we suggest that consumption logistics can help the development of perspectives on consumer choice that re-embodies consumer subjectivity. We contend that consumption logistics participate in the constitution of the consumer subject by recursively organizing orientation to action—that is, the context of consumer choice.
Consumption logistics shape consumer choice by arranging the body as part of a spatio-temporal configuration. As subjects only exist in the embodied performance of a practice (Thrift, 1996; Schatzki, 2002), there are no pre-formed subjectivities, but only ceaseless flows of practices at the junction of which subjects are located (Thrift, 1996). It follows that a subject’s choices are always practical, i.e. they involve doing something. For example, shopping carts equip consumer choice by framing the relevance of the store environment, redirecting bodies, deferring price calculations, and mediating between consumers (Cochoy, 2008). Similarly, shopping bags endow the consumer body with a larger logistical capacity for carrying goods—which may translate into less restrained choices (see also Hagberg, 2016)—and shape individual (inter)actions with other (non)human elements of the urban environment (Calvignac and Cochoy, 2016; Cochoy et al., 2015). Furthermore, the label of packages disembodies consumer food choices while standardizing temporal flows of food disposal through best-before dates (Yngfalk, 2016). The means of logistics mentioned in these examples frame possibilities for consumers to consume and for products to be consumed. Hence, these devices participate in the formation of consumer subjectivity as they govern the (inter)actions between subjects and objects of consumption (Hawkins, 2018).

A deeper understanding of the embodied dynamics of subjectivity may provide new knowledge on issues of unsustainable consumer behaviour. Manifold means of logistics await to be identified and analysed in order to investigate the specificities of how logistical arrangements produce sustainable consumer subjects. How does the current design of kitchens impact the production of food waste as items are forgotten at the bottom of drawers? How do the presence or absence of storage spaces within the home influence consumer shopping? How do backpacks equip the body with a limited bearing capacity, which constrains in-store choices? How do package-free stores participate in the constitution of a new consumer subject always equipped with his own shopping containers? Hence, the task of
future consumption logistics studies is to understand how a specific ethical consumer subject is formed through the recursive actualization of his relations with(in) the material environment (Hawkins, 2010).

**Situating the cultural meanings of consumption**

Consumption logistics also involve the arranging of meaning. From a practice perspective, meaning arises from the relative position of entities in an arrangement (Schatzki, 2002), while the arrangement itself gains meaning through the performance of a practice. For instance, the meaning of shopping carts is established in the practice of shopping, which is a performance of the relationship between the device, the consumer, and the supermarket aisles. The perplexity evoked by a shopping cart on the side of the road is due to a rupture of the unified consistency of the cluster where the shopping cart is “supposed to be.” The displaced cart does not lose its original meaning when it breaks with the coherence imputed to it through the practice of shopping. The cart’s situatedness in this cluster makes it stand out when the cluster is absent. Since the shopping cart is itself a symbolic representation, humans can ascribe meaning to the object out of place (e.g. carelessness of contemporary consumers) on top of the standard meaning of the object. But that is just an act of human-mediated representation. Meaning, instead, is an endless process of establishing the unified consistency of heterogeneous material relationships (Law, 1994). By configuring these relationships, consumption logistics are responsible for the constitution of consumption meanings. Therefore, a consumption logistics perspective is instrumental in getting beyond oppositions hindering our understanding of (un)sustainable consumption, such as meaning versus matter.

Besides establishing the meaning of “consumer” as discussed in the previous subsection, consumption logistics involve the transformation of the meaning of objects and resources. Shopping carts mediate the translation of symbolic representations of products as economic entities into products
as spatial entities (Cochoy, 2008). Refrigerators and Tupperwares mediate the translation of food as surplus to food as excess (Evans, 2012). Alternative socio-technical systems of water provisioning transform the meaning of “grey water” from waste into resource for other practices, such as gardening (Phipps and Ozanne, 2017). A deeper understanding of the logistical organization of consumption is likely to offer new perspectives on the symbolic and material transition of objects from resource to waste.

Finally, consumption logistics systems give meaning to broader spatio-temporal formations. By creating “conditions” on which consumption phenomena are performed, these systems shape the meanings, ideologies, and discourses of entire consumer cultures. For instance, storage and inventory practices created the conditions for cultures of abundance, where the ability to preserve goods was crucial to the development of a surplus economy. Today’s cultures of accumulation rely on specific practices of location. Alternative nomadic lifestyles and forms of access-based consumption challenge such practices while assigning less materialistic meanings to objects and their use (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). But how do location practices figure in processes assigning meaning to objects? How do alternative consumer lifestyles re-organize the location of consumers and objects and the logics it implies? The task of future research is then to understand the logistical organization of more or less sustainable cultures.

**Conclusion**

Other authors have emphasized that joining MSD and CMS approaches bears the potential for advancing the discipline of marketing as a whole (Nøjgaard and Bajde, 2020). By combining the two approaches, this paper improves our understanding of the complex interplay between symbolic and practical processes of market constitution. As argued throughout the paper, this is necessary to better
understand, if not even urge, changes in market phenomena. Accordingly, we propose that the logistical organization of consumption as a practical performance contributes at the same time to the institution of a symbolic order.

The paper introduces two novel theoretical concepts to study this logistical organization. The first concept is that of means of logistics, i.e. the material infrastructure that shapes, channels, directs, and prefigures flows of consumers and objects. These means organize flows of individual consumers and objects into a broader system of consumption by connecting consumer and market practices. The second concept identifies the performance of recursive contextualization through which consumer practices are made part of a market system. More specifically, we define consumption logistics as the system of interrelated practices that order the heterogeneous elements of consumption in space and time. Consumption logistics function as a mode of ordering the possibilities for consumers to consume and for objects to be consumed.

The paper contributes to research in consumer logistics. More specifically, while previous studies predominantly focused on consumer logistics as consumer transportation (see Brembeck et al., 2015; Calvignac and Cochoy, 2016; Cochoy et al., 2015; Hagberg, 2016; Hansson, 2014), we relate transportation to a broader system of logistical practices. This widened focus prevents the risk of overdetermining the importance of transportation practices in shaping consumption phenomena; and clearly articulates the connection between transportation and adjacent practices.

This second point also relates to the contribution of the paper to market dynamics research. Namely, by shifting from consumer to consumption logistics, the paper helps CMS explain how market-organizing activities are translated into consumption phenomena beyond market exchange (cf. Nøjgaard and Bajde, 2020). While other authors recognized that logistic systems (e.g. containerization) perform the link between production and consumption (Birtchnell and Urry, 2015), we identify and
specify the practices and infrastructures performing this link. Furthermore, the paper describes how the practical performance of logistics contributes to the institution of a symbolic order of consumption. This complements MSD research considering meaning-making as the process of “discursive negotiations” through which “multiple stakeholders” (Giesler and Fischer, 2016) articulate and transfer meanings in and around markets (see Coskuner-Balli and Ertimir, 2017; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014; Karababa and Ger, 2011). More generally, consumption logistics brings forward the complex practical-symbolic ordering of market systems. Therefore, we believe that this conceptualization can help actors within and outside the marketing discipline deal with complex market-related problems (e.g. sustainability transitions) that challenge the future development of modern consumer cultures.
References


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