

## Boundary Work and Identity Construction in Market Exchanges

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### Introduction

This Special Issue was inspired by the success of the Critical Marketing stream at the Fifth Critical Management Studies ('CMS5') Conference held at the University of Manchester in 2007. Thanks to the broad range of perspectives presented and the quality of discussion these provoked, the stream developed an initial critical understanding of what happens at and around the boundaries of firms in market contexts through deployment of the concepts of exchange, identity, self and otherness. Since we see *Marketing Theory* as the natural home for such topics, the four co-convenors of the stream approached the Editor-in-Chief with the proposal for a Special Issue aimed at extending critical scholarship around these themes. This edition of the journal represents the outcome of the resulting Call for Papers.

From our perspective as Guest Editors, the key consideration for inclusion in the Special Issue was that authors explicitly pursued a critical analysis of managerial and/or consumer constructions of self and/or other, whether in terms of B2C or B2B exchanges. We were looking for pieces that offered insights into notions of identity, variously conceived, with respect to the individual's and the organization's engagements with others (such as consumers, governments, other commercial organizations, pressure groups and so on). Furthermore, the Call for Papers invited contributors to consider a range of different and interconnected forms of exchange - social, economic and material, and the flow of (cultural) ideas. Within this context, some of the questions we hoped to explore included: How may the role of markets, boundaries, their materiality or discourses, be considered as productive of identity? How are repertoires, scripts, theories or narratives as well as material objects brought to bear in the construction of 'the market' and the legitimization of the self as a market participant? How do participants negotiate and deploy, resist or subvert market exchanges? From the submissions received, a dozen papers fitted this brief sufficiently closely to be sent out for review and, after a rigorous double-blind review process (even for those papers that had originally been presented at CMS5) we arrived at five pieces for inclusion. In this introductory essay, we

outline the contributions made by the papers that were finally selected, and discuss some of the key overarching themes that we see emerging from this fascinating collection of studies. To put these contributions in context, we begin with a short conceptual preface regarding the call's key issues.

### Conceptual Preface

As observed in an editorial introduction to a previous Special Issue of this journal on market practices and forms (edited by Araujo, Kjellberg and Spencer, 2008), the concept of 'the market' has been notably under-theorized by marketing scholars. This curious state of affairs (given the centrality of the notion to the field), in which scholars have taken for granted the existence of 'the market' as an *a priori*, self-generating reality, has perpetuated a situation in which there is only a nascent understanding of markets, and market exchanges, as social constructions. This constructionist view of markets underpinned the call for papers for this Special Issue, with authors encouraged to explore different hues of the processes of social construction at play in (or around the edges of) the various social actions, discursive forms and material practices that constitute market exchanges. Beyond the promulgation of a constructionist view of markets and marketing, our more specific goal in the production of this Special Issue is to develop a set of nuanced theoretical and empirical insights into the *nature of boundary work* which gives form to the processes of identity construction and social differentiation of a variety of actors in market exchanges.

Boundary work is a central activity in the social construction of market exchanges. Michel Callon's (1998) *The Law of Markets*, a key text in the canon of a practice-based approach to social science, employs notions of 'framing' to discuss how markets come into being 'through a range of practices involving different forms of expertise and material devices' (Araujo et al., 2008: 6). As noted by Araujo et al. (2008), Callon is critical of both the reifying and essentializing tendencies of neoclassical economic views of the market as well as Granovetter's (1985) social embeddedness thesis. In terms of setting boundaries around market activities, framing demarcates those elements which are taken into account and those which are ignored (or treated as 'external'). For Callon, 'it is owing to this framing that the market can exist and that distinct agents and distinct goods can be brought into play' (1998: 17). This constructionist perspective on markets is also held by Vickers (1995: 87) who claims:

'economic decisions and market actions are based, not on discoverable and therefore objectively existing economic knowledge, but on the imagination with which individuals can contemplate future possible outcomes of actions ... .'

In this way, market transactions can be constructed, or performed, whereby things are transformed into commodities, and agents into sellers and buyers. For instance, for a car to go from the producer-seller to the customer-buyer, it has to be 'disentangled', such that the ties between this commodity and other objects or human actors are cut, and boundaries erected around the frame. If the thing remains entangled, then the recipient cannot escape from the web of relations, and the framing is never over (Callon, 1998). By analysing the process of 'marketization' as one that implies investments and actions to build particular boundaries, thereby cutting certain ties and internalising others, we can avoid the risk of essentialism when we consider the market regime. As Vickers (1995: 94) puts it: 'Epistemically, the individual in the marketplace is influenced by the swirl of the reality complexes that continually emerge even when the market transaction is in process'. So what are some of the 'reality complexes' that come to bear on social constructions of identity and boundaries during market transactions?

The Special Issue on market practices and forms (Araujo et al., 2008) presents a number of studies that illustrate this 'performative idiom' of the market that offers one route into these reality complexes through the prism of practice-based social science. Whilst Cochon's (2008) paper presents the results of an ethnographic study of shopping carts as a frame through which consumers modify their shopping calculations and become part of a collective act of consumption, Finch and Acha studied the sale and construction of value of a second-hand oil field illustrating the 'different versions and valuations' (2008: 45) that existed during this market exchange. Simakova and Neyland's (2008) paper on a new product development and launch similarly illustrate the multiple efforts and forms of exchange that shape markets. Specifically they focus on how a range of firms, people and objects interact with each other to create the radio frequency identification market, crucially through narrative practices. Such narrative practices specify relations, mark boundaries, create identities and make possible social action for these particular actors.

In terms of performing markets, the papers collected by Araujo et al. (2008) demonstrate how the boundary work enacted in the interactions and networks of people, objects and organizations serve to create the conditions of possibility not only for value creation, but also for identity construction. Though framed from a different theoretical perspective, there are overlaps in the insights provided by this collection with scholars working on the anthropology of things. Appadurai's (1986) discussion of Marx's commodity thesis in Volume One of *Capital* for instance outlines three components of the 'commodity situation' – the commodity phase, commodity candidacy and commodity context. And Kopytoff's (1986) commoditization process thesis takes the view that objects have biographies or life

histories in which they can move in and out of a commodity state, and through which their meanings can change and become subject to cultural regulation. Both Appadurai and Kopytoff take the object, or more specifically the commodity, as the basis for understanding how action, meaning, value and identities come into being through shifting signifying and material forms.

Continuing with anthropological insights on the reality complexes of market exchanges, Lien (1997) argues that the concept of 'the market' performs two functions for market participants, especially those charged with marketing 'management': it serves as a model 'of' the world as it is, and as model 'for' appropriate action. This distinction implies a need for researchers to explore the ways in which things like 'markets' and 'consumers' come to be taken for granted as naturally occurring entities, existing independently of their processes of construction. The metaphors (or theories) that are commonly used by actors to structure propositional claims or to justify certain strategies, create social realities which may guide future action.

The distinction drawn by Lien (1997) is similar to Araujo et al.'s (2008: 8) call for scholars to study 'efforts to shape markets as well as efforts to operate in markets qua structures (e.g. to promote, advertise, sell) and the intended and unintended interactions between these practices'. In this regard, Lien's key contribution is to draw attention to the role of metaphor, and specifically marketers' deployment of a market metaphor, to classify, categorize and perform this object. In so doing, their 'discursive elaboration of an imagined "market" serves, simultaneously, as a key factor in the reproduction of the locality itself' (Lien, 1997: 90). This suggests a need for careful analysis of the performative consequences of the various theories/metaphors in use by market actors; theories in which 'a considerable effort is devoted to elaborating cultural differences within a continuum of familiarity on the one hand and foreignness on the other' (Ibid: 11). Marketing practice thus 'communicates difference', say, between one customer segment and another, or between 'experts' and 'neophytes', or even between the 'tamed' (through marketing) and the 'untamed' market. In this respect, Lien's ethnographic insights into the frozen food market pre-dates Kjellberg and Helgesson's (2006) call for empirical studies to describe and discuss the exchange, normalising and representational practices that give life to particular markets.

Moving away from Lien's anthropological sensitivities (yet retaining the language theme), the analysis of *linguistic practices* forms a major part of this Special Issue's exploration of identity and boundary construction. The discursive approaches taken by a number of the papers reflects the argument of Phillips and Hardy (2002: 52) that 'we cannot understand processes of organizing unless

we understand identity – and understand it from a discursive perspective because reified views of identity do not help researchers capture the fluidity of social life’. These discursive approaches offer a further invitation to understand the reality complexes of market exchanges, and the centrality of boundary work to them. This perspective is important in analyzing social life in the ambiguous and dynamic context of marketing exchanges where actors are engaged in the construction of a ‘tellable’ marketing story which ‘narrates boundaries, relations, agency and identities...’ (Simakova and Neyland, 2008: 96). Language use by participants in marketing exchanges produces particular ways of understanding such trading encounters and defines appropriate patterns of social activity, thus forming the basis for action (Palmer and Dunford 1996). Studying how these forms of understanding pattern the self and the environment will develop our comprehension of market actors’ potential modes of engagement.

More generally, our understanding of who we are is intimately connected to who we think others are; and a focus on identity discourse helps to direct analytic attention to how social actors recursively make sense of themselves in relation to others. Through ‘discursive positioning’ (e.g. Hopkinson, 2001), placing ourselves vis-à-vis others by drawing distinctions or by assuming resemblance and relatedness in everyday discourse, we talk our identities into being, producing a particular notion of ‘us’ or ‘me’ by comparison to ‘them’. Identity can therefore be seen as a matter of locating boundaries through the discursive enactment of relationships of similarity and difference. Claims of ‘sameness’ or ‘otherness’ in relation to, for instance, colleagues, clients or competitors, serve to position organizational members within a particular social context, hence establishing, legitimating and/or challenging relationships of power and status (Ybema et al., 2009). Since market actors (including managers representing producers and intermediaries, as well as consumers) frequently have to position themselves across different discourses and divides before a heterogeneous audience, it seems likely that we will find intense ‘boundary work’ (Hernes and Paulsen, 2003) or ‘identity work’ – that is, ‘the ongoing mental activity that an individual undertakes in constructing an understanding of self’ (Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas, 2008: 14) – performed at the notional boundaries of organizations and marketplaces. Exploring these discursive practices is important to the study of marketing since it illustrates how marketers and customers construct the relationships that constitute the proximate environment of ‘the market’, while simultaneously securing their own position within (or indeed outwith) it.

Recent empirical studies of cultural intermediaries (notably Cronin, 2004, McFall, 2004 and Moor, 2008) – those in occupations that produce symbolic and cultural goods and services that form part of

what Bourdieu (1984) refers to as the new petite bourgeoisie -- illustrate the interplay of boundary work and identity construction. For one, these studies illustrate empirically how culture and the economy (as well as production and consumption) are mutually imbricated and consequently hybrid categories produced through the work of cultural intermediaries; cultural objects are increasingly subject to economic logic, whilst economic logic hinges upon specific cultural values and formations. Moreover, the value created by cultural intermediaries, as noted by Bourdieu, rests on the embodied capital and subjective knowledge and preferences they bring as consumers to their work as producers. Their cultural capital serves not only to bring a form of cultural legitimacy to a particular object, it also in turn anchors their own professional status in an organization (as illustrated in Sender's (2008) study of sexuality as a cultural resource used to underpin the identity of gay marketing professionals), as well as their wider social status in respect of other class fractions. The papers in this collection, using different frames of reference and with different materials, attempt to consider in a multiplicity of ways the boundary work that goes into market exchanges and identity construction. They do so in ways that complement whilst extending the discussion of market exchange formation found in the earlier Special Issue on market practices through the presentation of a greater range of theoretical perspectives and a very specific conceptual focus on boundary work. Together, the papers offer a plural view of the nature of boundary work. This Special Issue confirms that market actors tend to picture their selves in terms of an ongoing 'conversation' that takes place across a further perceived boundary; a boundary between 'internal' ideas, desires and affections and 'external' images and evaluations. In the next section we outline the different ways in which the papers accomplish this.

## **The Papers**

The first of the five papers, which is by Finch and Geiger, tackles a concept very familiar to the marketing community – that of positioning. However, it does so using an analytical perspective – actor network theory (ANT) - only relatively recently embraced by marketing scholars. The paper argues that, beyond its immediate managerial use, positioning is a 'balancing act' that requires marketers to make their products (or 'objects') both comparable to other objects in a market frame (Callon, 1998), and at the same time singular to the consumer with reference to what lies outside the market frame. This balancing act is attainable because of what they term 'the marketing object'; an object that carries both possibilities – and hence the boundaries of the market – in it. Finch and Geiger explain that as part of their normal marketing activities marketers position market objects and thereby provide means for other market actors to evaluate differences and similarities. This

process is resonant with Lien's (1997) study of the manner in which metaphors are used to communicate difference. In this way marketers help disentangle product offerings in a market space, so formatting them as 'market objects'. Marketers simultaneously refer to cultural and material dimensions in the worlds of producing and consuming, thereby re-entangling these market objects in worlds beyond the market and re-formatting them as 'marketing objects'. As a result, positioning can refer to many 'others' - producers and consumers as well as those others which are necessarily poorly defined. By building on ANT perspectives with insights from the sociological and anthropological literatures, Finch and Geiger's paper deepens our understanding of the (object-related) positioning work carried out by marketing practitioners that takes place at the notional boundary of the market. Its main contribution is in the way it pluralizes boundary work using a particularly novel approach, enabling us to see positioning in a manner that moves beyond the simple dimensions of the perceptual maps so commonly presented in managerial texts.

Next, in the only paper in this Special Issue that focuses solely on the consumption element of marketing exchange, Patterson and Schroeder address perhaps the ultimate corporeal boundary, that of skin. The authors critically interrogate conceptualizations of identity within consumer culture theory (CCT) by considering tattoo culture, and exploring the double-sidedness of skin, its ambiguity and ambivalence. In this way, they examine the relationship between identity and consumption drawing upon the literature on the body and skin from sociology, cultural studies, feminism and consumer research. Utilizing three skin metaphors (skin as container, projection surface, and cover to be modified) to frame their discussion, Patterson and Schroeder generate a series of insights into intercorporeality, embodiment, and body projects. They further address these issues by examining interview data generated from a prior study of heavily tattooed women. Ultimately, they suggest that researchers may benefit by reducing their urge to seek meaning – a behaviour they seek as indicative of much recent consumer research -- and valorize instead an examination of what consuming bodies do. In an elegant twist on the notion of boundaries in relation to marketing exchange, Patterson and Schroeder use their analysis of tattooed skin to affirm that work on the border truly effaces that border. This is perhaps the most fascinating insight in a paper that is full of similarly subtle observations about the nature of boundaries in marketing exchanges. The authors conclude by calling for further boundary work that builds on this contribution in order to engage with our understanding of identity and consumption, grounded by cultural history, embodiment, and lived experience.

The third piece in this collection, by Smith Maguire, looks at the subjective dynamics of markets by problematizing a particular cadre of marketing practitioner, the cultural intermediary. It asks how the affective capacities and cultural capital of these practitioners serve as the basis for value creation, via the 'engineering' of affective opportunities and paths for consumers. The author examines the liminality of cultural intermediaries through a case study of wine promoters, using the theme of 'provenance' to provide an empirical perspective. These social actors mediate between production and consumption from a liminal position, forever oscillating twixt the boundaries of the various relations that support market exchange in the notional supply chain for wine. In other words, their liminal status affords them a view of both sides of the market equation as they operate at the interfaces between and within firms, and between firms and customers, and reflexively negotiate between their roles as symbolic producers and taste-leading consumers. Smith Maguire's study examines narratives that encompass both wine promoters' work in creating added-value for particular wines, and their identities as reflexive producer/consumers. In its distinctive account of boundary work in practice, the article contributes to emerging research on the subjectivity of market practitioners. This provides an enlightening view of the relationship between production and consumption, but one which Smith Maguire argues has yet to be fully developed in marketing theory and its discussions of value co-creation and the pro-active consumer (or 'prosumer'). It is in its exposition of how cultural intermediaries negotiate the 'inbetween' that the paper makes its most resonant contribution to our understanding of boundary work, especially in its focus on these intermediaries as prosumers (rather than end users) in the context of their reflexive identity project. The author concludes that further research on such liminal occupations is necessary to grasp how cultural intermediaries attempt to channel consumers' freedom along prescribed routes by affiliating their perceived fears and aspirations with particular product qualities.

Fittingly then, some of the themes in Smith Maguire's work are addressed by the fourth paper here, that by Parsons. This study explores the intermediate world of market participants acting as what the author designates 'market' rather than 'cultural' intermediaries. In this case, the main actors under scrutiny are antique dealers. The paper explores the antique world as a 'marketplace institution' within which particular sets of discourses circulate, and examines the intersection of these discourses in dealers' constructions of self, others and the 'world'. Parsons analyses interview data to search for ways in which market exchanges in the world of antique trading offer dealers resources for the creation and expression of their identities. She takes a perspective of identity as discursively produced through interaction, with dealers drawing on discursive repertoires of taste and aesthetics, and of morality and care, to construct identities. In doing so they mobilize differing,



(and typically oppositional) constructions of a variety of 'others': customers, other dealers, antique markets and antique objects. Parson argues that conceiving of the world of antique dealing as a marketplace institution directs attention towards the sharing and circulation of discourses within and between networks of dealers, traders, collectors and auction houses. Her study focuses on the ways in which these discourses are differentially (re)created, adopted and inter-woven in dealers' identity projects. Her findings add to the burgeoning number of studies of market(ing) participants that draw upon discursive approaches (e.g. Ellis and Ybema, 2010; Hopkinson, 2003) by helping us to understand how discourses and identities are thoroughly embedded in the marketplace. The main contributions of this paper are in showing how the sharing and circulation of discourses is key to boundary work; and, moreover, to relate this work to the notion of the market intermediary rather than the more widely-understood idea of the cultural intermediary.

The Special Issue concludes with a paper by Cameron, Lightfoot, Lilley and Brown which offers us a rather different take on market identities and boundaries from those explored in the preceding contributions. In a return to some of the theoretical concerns of our first paper (by Finch and Geiger), the authors claim that the 'turn to practice' across a broad range of social science areas, including marketing (see Araujo et al., 2008) often involves a move towards 'post-social' or 'object-centred' analysis. In a note of caution against going too far down this track, the authors ask: to what extent is it possible to think about markets and exchange without some version of the social acting as the basis for explanation? In the particular context of financial markets, a 'postsocial' perspective is often premised on the idea that new technologies, in particular screen displays of complex real-time financial information, have displaced 'the market' from the social and economic relations in which it might otherwise be assumed to be embedded. Instead, Cameron et al. argue that recent historical transformations in trading and markets are better characterized as 're-spatialisations' involving perceived shifts in boundaries that are founded on the placing and mediation of market spatiality. They employ the notion of the 'xeno-economy' to show how the spatial redistributions of the market has not been so much to efface sociality as set up new kinds of relations between local traders and institutions, notably mediated through geographically displaced 'trading arcades'. Their analysis emphasizes the immanence of modes of sociality to markets as intrinsically and necessarily social objects. Cameron et al. conclude that practice-based approaches quite legitimately draw attention to the labour which underpins the constitution of markets, including financial ones. They argue, however, that we also need to understand the complex historical dynamic of the shifting spatial placings and re-placings of identities, mediated by technology, which have delivered us the markets we are now obliged to inhabit. The main contribution to boundary work of this piece is the

way it looks at the virtual space and role of technology. It shows how technology mediates and creates the conditions for particular and changing kinds of market-related boundary work and subjectivation because it provides a different spatial order in which these processes can take place.

## Conclusion

This edition of Marketing Theory represents the outcome of the Call for Papers which emerged from the Critical Marketing stream at CMS5 and was designed to develop critical scholarship around the theme of boundary work and identity construction in market exchanges. The papers comprising this Special Issue bring fresh conceptual and empirical insights into the boundary work that takes place in and around various forms of market exchanges. The authors address issues of how markets and marketing are organized, and show how boundary work is captured through processes of self-identification and differentiation. The studies presented here all bring novel approaches to bear on the analysis of market exchanges. They refuse to work with *a priori* reified distinctions. They show, in a variety of approaches, how market objects and participants are realized in discursive and material form: for instance in considering the positioning of boundary objects in terms of both market and marketing activities; in illustrating how work on borders can serve to efface those very borders; in highlighting the discursive prosumer identity constructions of cultural intermediaries; in exploring the discursive work done by market intermediaries; and in articulating the influence of technology on spatial notions of the market. Taken together, the papers show that boundary work in market-related contexts is a plural and complex phenomenon.

The simple idea that markets and everything 'within' them are socially constructed offers a challenge to marketing-theoretical positions which ignore the role of discursive and linguistic practices and hold fast to a 'common sense' or pragmatic approach to the development of marketing theory. This Special Issue provides an example of the kinds of insights which are provided when the role of discourse and language is suitably acknowledged. The editors argue that further research of this kind into a wide range of market contexts, actors, exchanges, objects, signs and relationships is both desirable and achievable, and that critical marketing scholarship has an important role to play in the further development and enrichment of marketing theory.

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