

Product as Process, Position and Promise: Exploring the qualities, qualification and spatial dynamics of goods, services and experiences

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Session Conveners: Brian J. Hraes and Jenny Sjöholm - Uppsala University

Against the backdrop of a highly globalized and competitive marketplace, this session will interrogate the interplay between two important concepts. Acknowledging that 'a product is a process' (Callon et al. 2002), we are interested in how specific 'qualities' or 'agents of difference' can be added to products at multiple stages of the value chain. In some cases products are positioned based on material properties including the design, inputs, production process, labour arrangements and distribution. However, immaterial or symbolic qualities including the reputation of the brand, marketing, the retail experience and consumption as identity construction are also key sources of value and differentiation. In an increasingly saturated marketplace, promising products that are high quality, ethical, authentic, green or exclusive has become a popular strategy to 'stand out in the crowd.' Yet, the mechanisms through which these qualities are imbued, projected and evaluated remain poorly understood. Drawing on diverse conceptual and empirical perspectives, the papers in this session consider how the qualification process is socially constructed through the interplay between users, suppliers, intermediaries and producers across the entire value chain. The papers also endeavour to tease out the geographic origins and dimensions of specific qualities associated with goods, services and experiences.

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Positioning and projecting the micro-business: The embodied entrepreneur, digital technologies and unusual spaces
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Abstracts

Session I

Point of process, point of purchase: difference, differentiation and difference engines

Dominic Power - Uppsala University

This paper addresses the issue of difference in the contemporary economy. The paper contends that products are continually processed, defined and valued on the basis of their positionality and difference in crowded and volatile marketplaces. Differentiation is suggested as a central value creation mechanism that defines the qualities of the products we surround ourselves with. Differentiation is a process in which space and place play vital roles. However we cannot assume that the spatiality of competitiveness through difference is somehow based upon a fusion of Marshallian milieus with a Schumpeterian striving for growth through invention, novelty or innovation. Rather the paper 'locates' competitiveness and value in spaces where the processing and negotiation of 'difference' and 'quality' occur, and explores the notion that the construction of positionality and differentiation may entail geographies and milieus other than those traditionally associated with innovation, origination and creation. It is suggested that if we see products as processional and acknowledge that multiple agents of difference are involved in the negotiation and co-construction of value and quality then must we must begin to focus more specifically on points of process and points of purchase. The paper calls for a critical engagement with how the discipline may better understand those spaces (real and virtual) where differential and quality can be best processed, constructed and maintained.

Origination

Andy Pike - Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS), Newcastle University

Studies in Geography and broader social science have begun to acknowledge the spatial dimensions of brands and branding. But they have yet to develop conceptual and theoretical frameworks capable of understanding and explaining how actors involved in brands and branding create meaning and value in spatial circuits of production, circulation, consumption and regulation through processes of geographical association, and analysing what it means for people and places. Here, the concept of origination is introduced and theorised as the ways in which geographical associations are constructed by actors for commodity brands and their branding that embody and mean certain valuable things in specific market contexts. Origination is what those involved in branding do to try and show or imply where something comes from and/or is associated with as a way of creating stuff people want to buy. Challenging accounts interpreting the ubiquity and mobility of branded commodities as creating homogeneity and lessening spatial difference in a flat and slippery world, origination provides a more geographically sensitive approach that explains heterogeneity, diversity and variety in the ways in which commodity brands and their branding heighten geographical differentiation in a spiky and sticky world. Origination provides a means of lifting what Miriam Greenberg (2008: 31) calls the "mystical veils" woven by the strategies of

branding actors in seeking to manage, rework and sometimes obscure the provenance of where our goods are made and our services are delivered from, and the economic, social and political conditions through which they are organised.

Local food and global fashion: Geographies of marketing and valuation

Ulrich Ermann - Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography

Based on the idea of the production of markets by marketing marketing (Araujo, Finch & Kjellberg 2010) and marketing as a performative discipline (Lury 2004; Cochoy 1998) I argue that performing the origin of products in marketing practices creates and frames 'market spaces' and strongly influences the spatial formation of value chains and consumer producer relations. Moreover, promoting the products' origin performs qualities and meanings of quality.

In my paper I demonstrate firstly how 'local/regional brands' in the food sector are used to create new products and new market spaces. Secondly I demonstrate how 'global brands' in the fashion sector reinforce spatial structures of value and power as well as modes of valuation and qualification. I suggest to use a praxeological concept of value and valuation for a better understanding of products as processes.

Product as Process - Conceptualizing Value Making of Goods, Services and Experiences

Melanie Fasche - HafenCity University Hamburg

This paper will put forward a heuristic framework that aims to provide an innovative conceptualization of the organizational and spatial complexities of the production of goods, services or experiences whose value is predominately determined by immaterial properties. The purpose of this heuristic framework is to reveal how quality is added at multiple stages or in other words how value is made. The heuristic framework is derived from research on the validation process of contemporary visual art.

The paper will position the heuristic framework within recent debates in economic geography, in particular the debates on quality and meaning as integral parts of the production process (Callon et al. 2004, Pike 2009) and critically reflect on the relational nature and collective endeavor of the production process itself (Pratt 2008). It will be argued that the process of making value is (a) a socially and spatially entangled process of positioning within a status hierarchy, (b) determined by power relations, reciprocity and unintended effects, (c) ultimately resulting in a highly uneven distribution of value and (d) carrying history while also being in flux.

Technologising processes and markets for nature ‘in the making’: Qualities, qualification and quantification techniques in the creation of ‘biodiversity offsets’

Sally Randles and Carlos Ferriera - University of Manchester

Maintaining biodiversity can be situated within a broader societal context motivated by a desire to conserve or extend species variety. It represents just one out of a plethora of governance objectives which mediates humans' relationship with and interpretations of their obligations to, the 'natural' environment.

Very recently, biodiversity has become a contemporary site for experiments in governing nature through the 'market' creating markets for 'units' of nature. These units are offered up for economic exchange as 'products'; symbolically standing-in-for and discursively and materially aiming to further the policy aim of maintaining or extending species variety in a particular spatial setting. The aim of our paper is to get 'beneath the skin' of these market experiments, to understand in a very practical way how such markets-in-the making are being pro-actively constructed by actors. We get beneath the skin of the activities of market 'promoters' involved in creating a policy discourse promoting a market policy approach to governing biodiversity, those pro-actively creating market architectures and infrastructures to support (and extend? Join up?) these experiments; and actors involved in the day to day practice of buying and selling. The discursive and material construction of 'qualities' is crucial to our account (does a unit of polar bear, whale or panda have different qualities than a unit of spider or alligator? Is a unit of ice-scape worth more than a unit of wetlands?). How are these attributes qualified and put forward for economic exchange? And in particular (pace Michel Callon, Donald MacKenzie and colleagues) how are such attributes subjected to an array of quantification techniques and devices to enable commodification and thence standardisation of units for sale? Collectively we refer to these processes as technologising processes adding both theoretical and empirical contribution to the under-researched area of understanding processes of market emergence in the academic field that could be collectively labelled a new sociology of markets.

Session II

Capturing the Capricious Consumer: The New Production of Taste Knowledges

Richard Milne - University of Sheffield

The organoleptic, sensory characteristics of food remain a key way in which producers, manufacturers and consumers 'qualify' food. This paper explores the changing nature of qualification within the conventional food industry, and the association of product value with shifting conceptualisations of 'good taste'. Drawing on ethnographic, interview and literature-based analyses conducted with the UK food industry, it examines the definition of food quality within evolving networks of knowledge production associated with attempts to effectively capture patterns of shifting consumer tastes. In particular, the paper explores how the mobilisation of uncertainties about the capricious or distant consumer are used to prompt changes in the

expertises, spaces and bodies associated with the production of taste knowledges in the conventional food system. It examines how the traditional role and embodied expertise of the in-house product expert is being supplemented or replaced by new roles for consumers and the production of standardised knowledges within externalised, independent research centres. The paper argues that changes in the distribution of knowledge production represent a significant trend in conventional food systems that parallels the much more widely studied transformations associated with the emergence of alternative food systems.

Gatekeepers in the Geography of Quality

Atle Hauge - Eastern Norway Research Institute

Even though firms have always tried to convince the market that their products retain distinctive quality attributes, quality is not an absolute. What is defined and understood as good quality varies across time and space. There is an ever growing amount of information consumers need to process to establish which products or services that are of best quality for their certain needs. Many have pointed out the importance of mediators in this maze of knowledge. Some actors are holding strategic positions in these systems of information diffusion; they serve as gatekeepers. They have high influence in what kind of knowledge that slips through and how information is distributed.

Gatekeepers are often portrayed as well educated with a high competence level, holding important positions in the production system. One group with less status and recognition, are people working in shops. This paper explores the role of shop clerks as gatekeepers of quality in the sports equipment marketplace. Sports and outdoor products are usually meant to handle intense weather conditions, and endure demanding treatment. In addition, most of these products are manufactured and sold on the basis of intangibles such as style, fashion, trends and symbolic values. Thus, consumers seek information from many sources when they are in the market for new sport clothes or equipment, as this regularly quite high-priced product. In this paper I explore the shop assistants' role as information and product mediators, and argue that they often act as quality ambassadors.

The qualification processes of artworks: On self-directed experimentation and value creation in the art studio

Jenny Sjöholm - Uppsala University

Based on ethnographies of contemporary visual artists' individual work practices and art projects, this paper addresses the qualification processes of artworks. Building on the 'product as process' perspective put forward by Callon et al. (2002), this paper examines how artists, through individual experimentation, shape and define the qualities of art and thus 'bring art forward'. It is argued that through continuous experimentation artists add specific qualities to the production process as well as create new forms: 'only because the artist operates experimentally does he open new fields of experience and disclose new aspects and qualities in familiar scenes and objects' (Dewey 1934). The paper argues that qualification of artwork should be viewed as processual, composed of intersections and sequences of operations, fed by sensations and sources within the spaces where

artists are located and work. With a particular focus on the artist's studio, it is suggested that this workspace brings qualifying function and meaning to artistic production processes. The studio in itself is a space where the alchemy of an art form cannot be completely revealed. Yet, it is a workplace, a microcosm of the artist's world and a historical and creative laboratory, a space where artists' self-directed qualification processes are enacted. More generally, this paper also points at an economy facing individualization, and points to the importance of how value creation is imagined and practiced in individually set-up micro spaces of work and through self-directed work practices.

Cooking with...The role of intermediate actors in local food systems

Sofie Joosse - Uppsala University

Swedish consumers feel it is difficult to consume right; there are so many products to choose from and so many different aspects, like local, environmental friendly, healthy etc. to take into account. Actors mediating between producer and consumer have therefore become of increased importance to limit the choice of 'good products'. Though different sorts of intermediate actors can be distinguished, focus in literature has been on farmers' markets and their change potential for a transition to a sustainable food system. This article instead aims to include other emerging intermediate actors and analyses and compares four intermediate actors, all established in 2010: the farmers' market in Uppsala, 'Gårdsbutiker' (a mobile app for finding local food), an Uppsala consumer purchase group and a food box delivery service. Insights and concepts from economic sociology as well as actor-network theory are discussed and applied to local food production and consumption in Uppsala, Sweden. I argue this body of theory is needed to shed light on the diversity of the intermediate actors, the different forms of interaction and to assess their change potential for a transition to a sustainable food system.

'Let's Team Up:' Adding exclusivity and value by enrolling consumers in the process of designing, producing and promoting cultural products

Brian J. Hracs - Uppsala University

The contemporary marketplace for cultural products including music, fashion and video games is characterized by oversupply and intense competition (Power 2010). As a result, global firms and local independent producers struggle to differentiate and sell their goods and services. To date, however, little is known about the structures and spatial dynamics of the strategies that cultural producers develop and employ to stand out in the crowd. In particular, the practice of involving consumers in specific stages of the product life cycle remains poorly understood by geographers (Grabher et al. 2008). This presentation will consider the mechanisms through which luxury brands and local entrepreneurs team up with consumers to generate distinctiveness, value and brand loyalty. Drawing on primary and secondary research, the evolving nature of these relationships will be explored, including the transition from co-production to co-promotion. The presentation will also highlight how interactions between producers and consumers are situated within and enhanced by specific physical and virtual spaces such as workshops, performance venues, the street, social media websites and online forums. Using examples from music, fashion and video

games, the aim will be to develop a typology of consumer involvement and a better understanding of the role consumer play as agents of difference in the marketplace.

Session III

Process, position and promise: craft as product, experience and political activism

Doreen Jakob - University of Exeter / UNC Chapel Hill

In recent years, crafts have experienced a revival. No longer an outmoded form of manufacturing nor a sequestered domestic leisure activity, crafting today is being redefined and associated with emancipation, individualization, sub-cultural identification and anti-commercialism. Crafts are re-emerging not only as a substantial creative industry (process) but also as a lifestyle (position) and form of political activism (promise).

Crafting requires a high degree of manual dexterity and/or artistic skill and creating quality products became an institutionalized characteristic overseen by the rules and regulations of medieval guilds. However, it was the Arts and Crafts Movement that first introduced political agendas (social, industrial, moral and aesthetic) into the process of crafting followed by a second, hippie, “wave” of crafting that abandoned much of the quality in exchange for further political statements. Contemporary crafting attempts to reconcile and reconnect the aesthetic and political values of craft.

This paper will analyze the revival of crafts focusing on the ideas and ideals of “craftivism.” Most recently, “craftivism” (craft + activism) became a contested term leading to fierce discussions amongst crafters and on their positions, motivations and agendas. Yet, what are the current qualities attributed to crafts? What experiences and political agendas are attached to craftivism? The paper will explore the different meanings and tensions via interviews with crafters alongside an analysis of online forum discussions. It argues for a multifarious understanding of contemporary crafts that ranges from sole aesthetic agendas and ideas of corporate resistance to new entrepreneurial models and conservative promotions of (female) domesticity.

Let Me Show You How It’s Done: The Value of Conspicuous Production in Three Professions

Richard E. Ocejo - John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY

Through an ethnographic examination of three professions and their workplaces this paper analyzes how workers in select niches of their industries construct meanings for their products and services as well as professional self-identities by displaying the labor process for consumers. It examines the work of cocktail bartenders in specialized cocktail bars, microdistillers in small artisanal distilleries, and men’s barbers in retro-designed barbershops to explain how value gets produced among an emerging group of tradesmen. As history demonstrates and as the workers in these places attest, during the course of the twentieth century each of their industries underwent a process of deskilling, in which several of the professions’ key techniques, tools, steps, and

approaches disappeared from their everyday workplaces as the knowledge and cultures behind them also declined and transformed. In many cases automation and an increasing consumer demand for speed and efficiency were to blame for their downfall and for the separation of product from process as well as the obfuscation of the relationship between the two. In recent years, however, a new group of workers within these industries have placed a great emphasis on the lost and forgotten skills, knowledge, cultures, and processes that they feel their professions require to make and provide “quality” products and services. This includes “conspicuous production,” or the use of practices within the field to construct meaning and weave it into the experience of consumption. Rather than relying on speed and efficiency or hiding processes of production, these professionals both scale down the speed and volume of these processes and showcase them in the creating of value.

Where Does the Local Café End and the Starbucks Begin? Exploring the Process of Scene Formation in Toronto, Canada

Taylor Brydges - Martin Prosperity Institute, University of Toronto

Much like goods and services, local scenes develop through a dynamic process of production, consumption and qualification. Similarly, neighbourhoods within cities are constantly being positioned as attractive sites to live, work, visit, invest and experience. To explore these phenomena and the role of local specificity, this presentation proposes a five-stage model for understanding scene formation and transformation. While the first stage in this model evaluates the preconditions for development, the second stage traces the early emergence of commercial establishments which signal the start of neighbourhood change. In the third stage, growing commercial and social development coalesce in scene formation, where a unique neighbourhood identity emerges. In the fourth stage, gentrification and mainstream consumption opportunities, such as Starbucks, coexist alongside more authentic elements, and finally, the festivals stage completes the cycle.

Using a case study of Dundas West in Toronto, this presentation will demonstrate that the process of scene formation shares attributes with the construction of brands and consumer products. By extension, it will highlight the ways in which different actors and amenities collaborate to produce unique qualities within local scenes. In particular, this case study will demonstrate that the presence and profusion of restaurants, bars and independent retail establishments that focus on vintage and locally-rooted consumption experiences are vital ingredients of distinctive and vibrant scenes.

Certain things are made in certain places: place based trust in high value manufacturing

Rachel Mulhall - University of Birmingham

Manufacturing continues to be a significant contributor to the UK's economy, particularly as the sectors growth has been targeted as a fundamental means of recovery from the recent recession. However, the structure of the industry has changed dramatically, and continues to evolve, into a more specialised division tailored to the production of high value, complex products which can sustain a relatively high cost base. These products require certain characteristics in its production base: capabilities and trust. Trust as a specific quality is highly embedded in both individual

relationship characteristics and the institutional structures and practices of a given location. As such, the development of trust in a given place is intertwined with wider firm based practices, which can evolve into perceptions of trust qualities in a given place.

The paper empirically examines the continued adjustment of metal component manufacturers in the West Midlands (UK) and their relationships with their customer base to understand the evolution of embedded qualities in places. The study has found that perceptions of trust can develop into a 'brand' of a place, and consequently those manufacturing operations working within it, which ultimately influences the spatial organisation of production. The significance of this 'brand' as a sustainable competitive advantage in an international economy and its underpinning by firm based skills and political promotion of certain activities is discussed.

Positioning and projecting the micro-business: The embodied entrepreneur, digital technologies and unusual spaces

Carol Ekinsmyth - University of Portsmouth

Based upon an empirical study of 'life-stage micro-businesses', this paper will explore the new ways in which digital technologies and digital networking spaces are being used to position and promise quality products and services from embodied business owners. The micro-businesses explored here are headed by professional women who have embarked upon business-ownership as a solution to work-life conflicts after becoming mothers. Rather than engage in conventional business practice that would seek to separate the roles of business-owner and mother concealing the latter, the businesses that are the focus of this paper are actively positioned around the mother-identity of the entrepreneur in order to promise quality, difference, trustworthiness and shared experiences/knowledge between entrepreneur and customer. In many cases, customers share the mother-identity of the entrepreneur, but not always.

Having argued the extent and importance to the economy of this business-practice, the paper will focus on the ways in which the above is achieved, the spaces, places and mechanisms through which this promise and distinctiveness is communicated to the target audience. Here there is special focus on digital and social networking spaces. The paper argues that these entrepreneurs are breaking new ground in forging a new type of business practice where business can be profitably and beneficially constructed around the mother-role identity. Indeed the embodied entrepreneur becomes a key quality of the trusted business and its product(s). Focusing on this business practice, this paper thus takes a step forward in conceptualising the social and the economic as inseparable.