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THÈSE

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Cultures of Consumer Information

JURY

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This thesis is based on the following articles:

- Nøjgaard, M., & Woermann, N. (20XX). How Ideologies Shape Product Reviews: Epistemic Regimes in Expert Reviews and Online User Reviews.
- Nøjgaard, M. (2022). The Value-Translation Model of Consumer Activism: How Consumer Watchdog Organizations Change Markets. *Journal of Consumer Research*.
- Nøjgaard, M., Bajde, D., Özçağlar-Toulouse, N., & Askegaard, S. (20XX). A Callonian Perspective on Choice and Consumer Empowerment

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Abstract

This thesis is about the collectives that produce the functionality-related information consumers consult whenever they are considering what products to buy. I call these collectives cultures of consumer information. Cultures of consumer information warrant attention for two reasons. First, as the popularity of online consumer reviews suggests, consumers crave the ‘facts’ about the functionality of products before making a purchase, even if some consumer researchers have argued that functionality and facts only play a limited role in purchasing decisions. And second, cultures of consumer information call for attention because understanding the cultural patterns in how consumer information is produced can help us explain why different types of information, such as expert reviews and online user reviews, often offer contrasting characterizations of products. Uncovering the cultural factors that make different types of reviews diverge can help consumers to make better decisions, companies to better respond to consumer information, and policymakers to better manage the current consumer information environment.

Three articles make up the thesis. The first article develops a theoretical framework for understanding consumer information as a cultural construct. Based on a comparative case study of the user reviews of Amazon.com and the expert reviews of the Danish consumer organization THINK, the article shows how ideology is expressed in and shapes product reviews. The second article explores how a particular culture of consumer information, THINK, has influenced Danish consumer markets through their product review practices. The third article takes up the question of how cultures of consumer information can empower consumers, conceptually discussing the uneasy links between power, information, and choices.

Together, the articles bear implications for how consumers, companies, and policymakers should navigate in the current consumer information environment. Furthermore, the articles establish the

cultural study of functionality and consumer information as a promising avenue of research for consumer researchers, suggesting new routes of inquiry into issues such as market ideologies, consumer empowerment, and consumer activism.

Résumé

Cette thèse porte sur les collectifs qui produisent les informations consultées par le consommateur afin de décider quel produit acheter. Nous nommons ces collectifs, cultures de l'information du consommateur. Nous nous intéressons à ces cultures pour deux raisons. Premièrement, bien que des chercheurs en consommation avancent que les informations factuelles et la fonctionnalité d'un produit ne joue qu'un rôle limité dans la décision d'achat, la popularité des avis de consommateurs en ligne nous montre que les consommateurs recherchent des informations sur la fonctionnalité des produits avant de faire un achat. Deuxièmement, nous nous intéressons aux cultures de l'information du consommateur car connaître les modèles culturels de production de l'information peut nous aider à expliquer pourquoi différents types d'informations, tels que les avis d'experts ou de consommateurs, offrent souvent des informations différentes. La découverte des facteurs culturels qui font que les différents types d'avis divergent peut aider les consommateurs à prendre de meilleures décisions, les entreprises à mieux répondre à l'information et les décideurs à mieux gérer l'environnement actuel de l'information des consommateurs.

Trois articles structurent la thèse. Le premier article développe un cadre théorique afin de comprendre l'information des consommateurs comme une construction culturelle. Sur la base d'une étude de cas comparative des avis d'utilisateurs sur Amazon.com et des avis d'experts de l'organisation de consommateurs danoise THINK, l'article montre comment l'idéologie s'exprime et façonne les avis sur les produits. Le second article explore comment la culture de l'information du consommateur THINK a influencé les marchés de consommation danois via leurs pratiques d'évaluation des produits. Le troisième article cherche à comprendre comment les cultures de l'information du consommateur peuvent rendre les consommateurs plus autonomes, en discutant des liens complexes entre le pouvoir, l'information et les choix.

Ensemble, les articles apportent des implications sur la manière dont les consommateurs, les entreprises et les décideurs politiques devraient gérer l'environnement actuel de l'information du consommateur. En outre, les articles désignent l'étude culturelle de la fonctionnalité et de l'information du consommateur comme une voie de recherche prometteuse pour les chercheurs en consommation, suggérant de nouvelles pistes de recherche sur des questions liées aux idéologies de marché, au consommateur autonome, et au consommateur activiste.

Resumé

Denne afhandling omhandler de sociale systemer som producerer den funktionalitets-relaterede information som forbrugere benytter sig af, når de overvejer, hvilke produkter de vil købe. Jeg kalder disse systemer forbrugerinformationskulturer. Forbrugerinformationskulturer fortjener opmærksomhed af to årsager. For det første, som populariteten af online brugeranmeldelser antyder, higer forbrugere efter fakta der beskriver funktionaliteten af produkter, inden de køber dem, omend nogle forbrugerforskere har argumenteret for, at funktionalitet og fakta spiller en begrænset rolle i købsbeslutninger. For det andet påkalder forbrugerinformationskulturer sig opmærksomhed, fordi viden om de kulturelle mønstre der kendetegner produktionen af forbrugerinformation kan hjælpe os med at forklare, hvorfor forskellige typer information – såsom ekspert-produktanmeldelser og online brugeranmeldelser – ofte kontraster i deres måde at karakterisere produkter på. Afdækningen af de kulturelle faktorer der forårsager disse kontraster kan hjælpe forbrugere med at træffe bedre beslutninger, virksomheder med at reagere bedre på forbrugerinformation, og politiske beslutningstagere med bedre at styre det nuværende forbrugerinformationsmiljø.

Afhandlingen består af tre artikler. Den første artikel udvikler en teoretisk ramme til at forstå forbrugerinformation som en kulturel konstruktion. Baseret på et komparativt case-studie af brugeranmeldelser på Amazon.com og ekspertanmeldelser fra Forbrugerrådet Tænk viser artiklen, hvordan ideologi er udtrykt i og formgiver produktanmeldelser. Den anden artikel udforsker, hvordan én bestemt forbrugerinformationskultur, Forbrugerrådet Tænk, har påvirket danske forbrugermarkeder gennem deres produktanmeldelses-praksisser. Den tredje artikel drejer sig om spørgsmålet om, hvordan forbrugerinformationskulturer kan styrke forbrugeres beslutningsevner og diskuterer de konceptuelle koblinger mellem magt, information og forbrugervalg.

Samlet har artiklerne implikationer for, hvordan forbrugere, virksomheder og politiske beslutningstagere bør navigere i det nuværende forbrugerinformationsmiljø. Endvidere etablerer artiklerne det kulturelle studie af funktionalitet og forbrugerinformation som et lovende forskningsområde for forbrugerforskere og peger mod nye måder at undersøge spørgsmål om markedsideologier, myndiggørelse af forbrugere, og forbrugeraktivisme.

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While most of the words in this thesis are mine, I cannot take full credit for the ideas they express and whatever wisdom they may contain. Indeed, when I wrote the words, I often felt I was simply trying to capture the ideas that others much wiser than me were willing to share as they commented on my work.

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1 Introduction

> [A] theoretical distinction between the functional and the symbolic seems unfortunate, since it tends to ignore a basic trait of the human being: that this species has no access to the world other than through its own interpretations. (Askegaard & Firat, 1997, pp. 125–126)

In 1959, Sidney Levy (1959, p. 118) published his pioneering article on consumers' "new whys for buys", championing the idea that consumers no longer buy products only for their functional benefits but also for the symbols or cultural meanings they express. Since then, consumer researchers – especially those working within the tradition of consumer culture theory (CCT) – have cemented the study of how the cultural meanings of goods are constructed and consumed (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). However, in their turn towards cultural meanings, CCT researchers have largely left behind the study of functionality-oriented consumption – perhaps due to its connotations of the rational, utility-maximizing consumer whom the movement of CCT had arisen to escape. What has emerged within consumer research since Levy's (1959) rallying call to turn our attention towards the symbols for sale in modern markets is a master dichotomy between the cultural and the functional aspects of consumption (Askegaard & Firat, 1997, pp. 124–131). This thesis heeds calls to unite the study of the 'cultural' and the 'functional' (Askegaard & Firat, 1997; Bajde et al., 2015; Cochoy, 2008) and demonstrate that a deeper understanding of consumer culture does not require us to move away from questions of product functionality. Instead, our understanding of consumer culture stands to benefit from moving *closer* to the functions of products – into the very processes of their constitution.

I demonstrate this by homing in on what I call 'cultures of consumer information'. By this term, I mean the systems of practices that construct the functionality-oriented information consumers consult whenever they are considering what products to buy. Cultures of consumer information come in many forms and include the institutions that test products in laboratories (e.g., Consumer Reports), the ecosystems of online user reviews (e.g., Amazon.com), and certification and labeling organizations (e.g., Fairtrade).[1] Cultures of consumer information are central to the study of product functionality because they exist to inform consumers about the functional attributes of products.

Two observations underline why cultures of consumer information matter for understanding contemporary consumer culture. The first observation is that consumers still appear to have an appetite for the 'facts' about the functionality of products. Even though Levy (1959) declared in the late 1950s that consumers' concern with the functions of products is decreasing, much suggests that 'economic man' is still alive and well.[2] Consider for example the rise of online user reviews on sites like Amazon.com and their increasing influence on consumers' decisions (Simonson & Rosen, 2014). Consumers want to know about the functional benefits of products and actively seek out sources that provide this information.

So, consumer information merits attention, but why then study the *cultures* that construct it? A cultural perspective is needed because of the simple reason that consumer information is a cultural phenomenon. No matter how meticulously it has been crafted, consumer information should not be taken as a reflection of the inherent, 'true' functionality of a product. As Askegaard and First (1997, p. 126) remind us, to even talk about functionality or utility does not make sense "without a specific goal for these, and such a goal cannot be but cultural". This philosophical insight is well-illustrated by the observation that, within the current consumer information environment, different providers of information often paint contradicting portrayals of products. Take the example of the test-based reviews

[1] Consumer information here, then, refers to what most people would refer to as the 'hard facts' about the functionality of products (e.g., efficiency, speed, or durability) and not information about product characteristics that are more based on taste (e.g., whether something is beautiful or stylish).
[2] To be fair, Levy (1959) was right that the nature of consumption was changing in the 1950s. As consumption became increasingly democratized with the acceleration of the industrial revolution, consumers were increasingly able to *choose* their consumption, rather than simply consume what was available. This meant that consumption – now reflective of consumers' individual choices – became an important activity for signaling one's identity, which in turn meant that consumption choices became increasingly driven by the identity-related meanings of products (Holt, 2002). What I am problematizing is not Levy's historical analysis of the changing nature of consumer culture but rather his dichotomizing of the symbolic and the functional.

of Consumer Reports and online user reviews on Amazon.com, which have been shown to vary greatly in their evaluations of products (Chen & Xie, 2008; de Langhe et al., 2016a). While both types of reviews are meant to assist consumers in evaluating product functionality, they appear to do so in markedly different ways. And which type tells the 'truth' is not so easily resolved. Some argue that the reviews of Consumer Reports are to be trusted because they are based on thorough laboratory tests (de Langhe et al., 2016a), while others think that the reviews on Amazon.com are more trustworthy because they to a greater extent reflect the preferences of real consumers (Simonson, 2016). This debate illustrates that there are multiple ways of understanding what counts as the 'truth' when it comes to rating products and that there are no universally accepted procedures for resolving what understanding is most appropriate. The status as factual knowledge of product reviews, labels, and other forms of consumer information is always anchored in a set of cultural practices of constructing and warranting knowledge.

These two observations – that functionality-oriented consumer information still plays an important role in consumption choices and that such information is a cultural construct – bring out why cultures of consumer information call for analytical attention. If consumer information is a cultural construct, then cultures of consumer information define the 'true', functional value of products and, if functionality impacts how consumers choose, such definitions have real consequences. We must understand how cultures of consumer information operate to be able to better detect their often-subtle contribution to the ordering of markets. Only this way will we be able to analyze providers of consumer information for what they really are – not as neutral providers of buying advice but as actors deeply implicated in the politics of markets.

This perspective invites a new way of asking questions about consumer information. It shifts our attention from the validity or truth value of different kinds of consumer information to the effects that different kinds of information promote. For example, the discussion of which type of product review speaks the truth is replaced by a discussion of who benefits from the truths offered by for example Consumer Reports compared to those available on Amazon.com. Such questions become central when we accept that consumer information is not a neutral reflection of a set of indisputable product characteristics simply waiting to be 'discovered' but rather a construction, a construction that benefits some actors more than others and, importantly, a construction that could be different.

1.1 Study Aims and Research Questions

The thesis aims to provide a culturally sensitive analysis of the construction of consumer information and of what such construction processes mean for how markets operate. I set out on this agenda with a view to contribute to two areas of research. First, as already noted, the thesis seeks to break new ground in CCT by challenging the master dichotomy between the functional and the cultural, a dichotomy which has often been deployed to distinguish CCT from neighboring fields of research (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). The ambition is to direct the imagination of CCT researchers towards how one may go about conducting cultural studies of functionality-oriented aspects of consumer culture. The thesis points to consumer information as fertile ground to explore the value of a cultural lens on functionality.

In doing so, the thesis stresses that our contemporary consumer culture is also a *knowledge culture* in the sense that it is a culture in which knowledge is valorized (as reflected for example by the rise of online user reviews) and a culture that engenders particular forms of knowledge (e.g., the Amazon star rating representing a highly particular way of 'knowing' products). Therefore, knowledge practices, in their various forms, deserve a place within the study of consumer culture, and this thesis is meant to help carve out this place.

The thesis also seeks to contribute to research that already takes the role of information in consumer decision-making seriously, such as the information-processing paradigm of consumer decision-making (Bettman, 1979). While this literature acknowledges the importance of information for understanding consumption phenomena (above all, consumer choice), information has here been portrayed as decidedly *non*-cultural. It is for example revealing that while plenty of studies have explored how consumers *use* information (e.g., Bettman et al., 1998; Simonson, 2015; Thaler & Sunstein, 2009), rarely have they explored how information is created. The creation of information is understood as a process of reporting on the unnegotiable characteristics of products, characteristics that may not be immediately visible (e.g., the durability of a car) but that nonetheless reside in the product and that can be brought out by using appropriate procedures (e.g., crash testing a car). This reduction of information to a reflection of the external reality of products places the information creation process outside the scope of social and cultural analysis. In this view, it is a technical process whose unfolding and eventual result (e.g., a product rating) is not determined by cultural factors but rather by the external or 'real' characteristics of the product. This literature thus leaves us with few means of understanding of the social and cultural processes that give consumer information its shape. This thesis seeks to challenge the assumption of the externality of product functionality by studying how it takes shape within practices of creating information about it. Cultures of consumer information are not cultures of discovering the characteristics of products but rather cultures of constructing them.

I pursue these two principal lines of contribution by exploring three research questions. First, I ask: *How do the ideologies underlying cultures of consumer information shape their knowledge creation practices?* My interest in ideology[3] comes from work suggesting that ideology is intimately linked with how we think about 'truth' and knowledge (Foucault, 1991; Hirschman, 1993; Rouse, 2005). The role of ideology within cultures of consumer information thus represents a promising area for exploring the cultural forces that shape how we come to know what we know about product

[3] I understand ideology as "a system of beliefs and values" (Hirschman, 1993, p. 537) that form a particular worldview and imply a particular disposition towards the world.

functionality. The research question comes with the important delimitation that I am not looking into the full system of practices that make up cultures of consumer information and how these practices shape product knowledge. More narrowly, I open up one dimension of cultures of consumer information – ideology – and explore how this dimension matters for how cultures of consumer information create knowledge. Based on what we know from past literature on ideology, developing a vocabulary for addressing the ideological underpinnings of cultures of consumer information is an important step towards understanding the cultural shaping of functionality-oriented information.

The second question guiding the thesis is: *How do cultures of consumer information influence markets?* We can only fully understand the role of cultures of consumer information in modern markets if we explore how these cultures shape market phenomena. It is, put differently, not enough to explore how cultures of consumer information create knowledge, we must also explore how their particular knowledge creation practices translate into market effects.

The third and final guiding question zooms in on one such effect, namely the empowerment of consumers: *How can cultures of consumer information empower consumers?* This potential effect merits particular attention because a cultural perspective on consumer information complicates the connection between consumer empowerment and the provision of consumer information. Consumer information is often thought to empower consumers to make decisions that are aligned with their 'real' wants and needs. Conventional wisdom suggests that the more enlightened consumers are, the better decisions they take. Hence, empowerment becomes a task of providing consumers with as much knowledge as possible (for an overview of this line of thinking in policy circles, see e.g. Shove, 2010). The core assumption here is that more knowledge will allow consumers to see products for what they 'really' are. A cultural perspective on consumer information problematizes this assumption, as it stresses that all consumer information can ever offer consumers is access to one version of the 'reality' of products. Providing consumers with more and more information does not mean equipping consumers to piece together the full, definitive picture of products, leading them towards conditions of perfect information (Simonson & Rosen, 2014). On the contrary, different pieces of information may paint different pictures of the products in question. So, if simply piling information onto the consumer cannot open consumers' eyes to the universal truth behind products, how does one go about creating the 'enlightened' consumer? What kind of information counts as empowering? How can cultures of consumer information work towards empowering consumers to make better choices?

1.2 Thesis Structure

8 chapters make up this thesis. Chapter 1 introduces cultures of consumer information, explains why they are worth studying, and outlines the research questions the thesis pursues and the projected contributions to emerge from exploring these questions. Chapter 2 turns to the theoretical foundations of the thesis, explaining how Science and Technology Studies (and its various inroads into marketing scholarship) provides promising tools for exploring how cultures of consumer information create knowledge about products and shape markets. Chapter 3 describes the methodological considerations underlying the design of the study. Chapter 4, 5, and 6 present the articles that report the findings from the study of the thesis. Each article addresses one of the three research questions presented in Chapter 1. Chapter 4 presents a comparative study of how two cultures of consumer information create knowledge about products, paying particular attention to how ideology shapes the knowledge practices of cultures of consumer information. Chapter 5 presents a historical study that traces how the knowledge practices of one particular culture of consumer information have intervened in the ordering of markets. Chapter 6 is a conceptual article which discusses the question of how cultures of consumer information can empower consumers, in so doing rethinking the links between consumer choice, empowerment, and information. Chapter 7 reflects on the findings from the three articles and

discusses how they advance extant consumer research. Finally, Chapter 8 offers a conclusion and maps out the new research vistas the thesis brings into view.

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2 Theoretical Foundations

2.1 The Social Construction of Knowledge

I draw my primary theoretical inspiration from the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS), and particularly the research within this field that is concerned with the social construction of scientific knowledge (Knorr-Cetina, 1981; Latour, 2003; Latour & Woolgar, 1986). Central to this line of thinking is Bruno Latour (2003) who argues against the conventional wisdom that scientific facts represent universal truths uncovered through the Scientific Method. Latour does not intend to state that Science somehow fabricates ‘fake’ knowledge but simply offers the observation that facts do not arise on their own. They must be constructed to exist. It for example takes the deployment of scientists, technical instruments, written reports, and bureaucratic structures for facts to ever see the light of day. Latour’s contribution was to note that that when you observe how these diverse elements are deployed in the construction of facts, you see how the resultant facts always bear traces of how they were constructed. For Latour, facts do not transcend the work which brought them about but rather take their shape from this work.

The social construction of facts is particularly evident when considering the many irreducible ambiguities that riddle scientific work. Take the example of how the facts about the reliability of turbojet engines are constructed (Downer, 2007). How reliable engines are ‘known’ to be depends on how turbojet reliability is defined and what counts as a relevant trial for testing reliability. If reliability is defined as the ability to safely ingest birds, engines can both be tested with real or rubber birds. Real birds effectively mimic reality but, because they have beaks, bones, and talons, their body density differs from bird to bird, making it difficult to conduct reliability tests in a consistent way. For consistency, artificial birds, with their uniform gelatin bodies, are better suited, but tests with these birds are not as representative of real bird strikes. The point here is that facts can never simply be ‘read off’ objects themselves. Which bird is the right choice cannot be settled ‘scientifically’ but involve human judgement. And importantly, the choice of bird will ultimately shape the reliability rating and thus can determine whether a turbojet engine is deemed reliable or not (Downer, 2007). Put more generally, facts and practices of fact-finding are always inseparable.

I treat the construction of consumer information much like the construction of scientific facts. In doing so, I also follow Callon et al.’s (2002) work on ‘qualification’, which refers to the process of assigning qualities to products (see also Beckert & Musselin, 2013). Callon et al. argue that products, like the subject matter of Science (e.g., Nature), do not possess an essence or a single and limited set of properties that can be objectively identified. Rather, the qualities of products are constructed – products are ‘qualified’ – and the generation of ‘factual’ consumer information represents a central source of product qualification. As Callon et al. (2002, p. 198) argue:

> properties are not observed; they are ‘revealed’ through tests or trials […] The characteristics of a good are not properties which already exist and on which information simply has to be produced so that everyone can be aware of them. Their definition or, in other words, their objectification, implies specific metrological work and heavy investments in measuring equipment.

The creation of consumer information, in this perspective, is not simply an epistemological exercise but also an ontological one. It does not simply generate knowledge about the product but also contribute to its constitution. This is why we should concern ourselves with the creation of consumer information. What is at stake is not simply the opening of a window into a set of product qualities that are already there but rather the construction of the qualities themselves.

2.2 Epistemic Cultures

The second theoretical inspiration for this thesis is work on the 'epistemic cultures' (Knorr-Cetina, 1999) of science. This work builds on Latour's (2003) observation that facts are socially constructed but zeroes in on the patterns that characterize how practices of fact-construction are organized. Scholars like Karin Knorr Cetina (1999) have shown that different collectives of scientists operate with very different understandings of what counts as knowledge and hence employ very different practices in the pursuit of knowledge. What we normally refer to as Science is composed of various 'epistemic cultures', as Knorr Cetina calls them. This way of thinking is a break from the traditional way of understanding Science as a *unified* enterprise, where all scientists universally follow the Scientific Method and subject knowledge claims to a uniform set of epistemic criteria (e.g., reproducibility or statistical significance) before granting them the status of 'scientific fact'. The notion of 'epistemic culture' means that what qualifies as a fact for one collective of scientists may not qualify as such for another collective. It means that there are no *universal* criteria or procedures for establishing the facticity of a claim, only culturally-contingent ones.

My notion of 'cultures of consumer information' draws directly on Knorr-Cetina's (1999) work on epistemic cultures. What I am suggesting here is that epistemic cultures do not just characterize how Science creates knowledge about the natural world but also applies to the creation of knowledge about products. Like scientific knowledge, so too are different types of consumer information – for example, a product test or a user review – rooted in a specific culture of constructing, validating, and disseminating knowledge claims. Alexandre Mallard's (2007) study of the French consumer organization Que Choisir provides a telling example of how epistemic cultures are at work in the creation of consumer information. Mallard stresses how the way Que Choisir – an organization that tests products and translates the test results into product reviews for consumers to use – goes about revealing the 'facts' behind the products they test is anything but purely technical and neutral. Rather, the procedures are laden with ambiguities that can only be bridged through judgement. The test managers of Que Choisir must for example decide which products to sample, which test criteria products should be subjected to, and how to present the results. And, as Mallard shows, Que Choisir responds to these ambiguities and qualifies products in a “fairly original” way, so that the qualities the organization assigns to products “usually stand in opposition to those promoted by market suppliers” (Mallard, 2007, p. 153). In this way, Mallard’s study underlines the relevance of studying not just the epistemic cultures making ‘discoveries’ to be published in scientific journals but also the ones responsible for the distribution of consumer information in modern markets.

An important benefit of applying the concept of epistemic cultures to characterize the construction of consumer information is that it provides a lens through which we can *compare* the cultural foundations of different types of information. The concept was originally intended for comparative purposes, being developed by Knorr-Cetina (1999) to compare how the disciplines of high energy physics and molecular biology construct knowledge. Treating consumer information as emerging from epistemic cultures may help us explain *why* different types of information often offer contradicting portrayals of products, which is a prominent feature of today’s consumer information environment (Chen & Xie, 2008; de Langhe et al., 2016a). The notion of epistemic cultures suggests that types of information contradicting each other may be simultaneously valid but also that they are grounded in different conceptions of validity.

In this way, insisting on the role of epistemic cultures renews the discussion around the validity of different types of consumer information. Instead of being distracted by discussing how well the different types capture some elusive set of ‘true’ or ‘objective’ qualities (see for example de Langhe et al., 2016a), we are invited to inquire into other matters, such as how the epistemic cultures that produce consumer information define what counts as ‘truth’ and what their definition of ‘truth’ means for consumers’ choices and the organization of markets more generally. We should not ask, in other words, which epistemic culture most reliably speaks the truth but what the effects are of the truths that they offer.

2.3 Market Practices

For theoretical inspiration to address how cultures of consumer information influence markets, I turn to a branch of literature that draws on insights from STS to explain market phenomena, namely Constructivist Market Studies. CMS is an interdisciplinary area of research concerned with how markets are constituted in practice. CMS is founded on the perspective of actor-network theory (Latour, 2005) that reality does not exist as a readymade phenomenon but rather as a phenomenon constantly in the making (Araujo, 2007). Applied to markets, this perspective implies that markets cannot be understood as static pools of buyers and sellers or as automatically arising from a set of market 'laws' (Callon, 1998), as economics (Slater, 2002) and marketing studies (Araujo et al., 2010) have often done. Nor are markets purely socio-cognitive formations, such as 'product categories' (Rosa et al., 1999). Rather, CMS holds that it takes concrete action, carried out by an ample array of actors, to make markets exist. Kjellberg and Helgesson (2007) term these actions 'market practices'. Quite simply, a market practice is any activity that contributes to making markets, and thus covers anything from buying a product to making an advertisement.

In this thesis, I consider practices of producing consumer information as market practices. That is, I do not just treat them as practices of creating knowledge (i.e., epistemic practices) but also as practices that contribute to the ongoing organization of markets.

This perspective means that I am not just looking at practices of creating consumer information with the intention of figuring out what 'caused' them. The practices of cultures of consumer information are not simply 'outcomes', the byproducts of structural forces such as ideologies or discourses. Rather, following CMS, I hold that practices are 'performative' (Araujo et al., 2008); they are the very processes that shape and re-shape markets. This is why we must look 'within' practices and attend to their particularities to understand how market order is accomplished. To take an example, I am less interested in how the discourse of Science shapes the product testing practices of consumer organizations such as Que Choisir and more interested in how the testing practices of Que Choisir manifest the discourse of Science in a particular way and with a particular effect on markets. The lesson I draw from CMS is that to understand how cultures of consumer information create knowledge and influence markets, we must attend to the practical details of their knowledge practices and try to identify what these details may mean for other market practices, such as consumers' shopping practices or manufacturers' design practices.

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3 Methodology

3.1 Philosophical Position

The thesis pursues the research agenda described above by mobilizing a plurality of qualitative methods. But before I present the exact design of the study, I must describe my philosophy of knowledge. Presenting the philosophy of knowledge that guides this thesis is a necessary step because it is this philosophy that warrant my methods. To properly evaluate the appropriateness of the methods used, we must be able to scrutinize the philosophy behind them. Do my methods for example capture that which is assumed to exist? In other words, are my methods attuned to my ontology? And can my methods generate statements that we can confidently qualify as 'knowledge'? In other words, do my methods pass the knowledge criteria postulated by my epistemology?

My philosophical position is aligned with what others have labeled 'practical constructivism' (Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2006, p. 841). In the chapter on my theoretical inspirations, I have already implicitly touched upon what a commitment to 'practical constructivism' entails, so let me in this chapter focus on what distinguishes practical constructivism from other philosophical positions. Practical constructivism differs from positions rooted in positivism, in that it states that we cannot capture social reality as a single and coherent set of statements. Reality does not exist independently from the ones who study it, meaning that studying reality will forever be an activity of 'constructing' rather than 'discovering' it. This point is effectively illustrated by considering that there are no neutral, culture-free ways of stating a fact. At a minimum, language, or some other culturally-contingent mode of representation, is involved. In this way, knowledge does not transcend the culture of the knowledge seekers but is "of this world", as Foucault (1991) puts it. This also means that, as I have argued previously, consumer information does not reflect some external and independent reality of the product but must be regarded as contributing to a construction – or a 'version' (Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2006) – of the product.

Practical constructivism is thus aligned with other forms of constructivism in insisting on the 'constructedness' of social reality. But practical constructivism differs from what is sometimes referred to as 'social constructivism', a philosophical paradigm that treats human beings and their interactions as the source from which social reality emerges. While a paradigmatically diverse field (Thompson et al., 2013), CCT has been heavily influenced by social constructivism, as CCT scholars often treat consumers – that is, human beings – as the primary agents that shape social reality (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011; M. Nøjgaard & Bajde, 2021). In contrast, 'practical constructivism' stresses that the social construction of reality arises not only from the interactions between humans but also between humans and many other *things*. This philosophical orientation is founded on the observation that things – such as products – do not just matter to social reality through the meanings that human beings assign to them but also through their material qualities (Latour, 1992). Put differently, things 'push back', as human beings interpret and interact with them. This is why practical constructivism suggests that social reality emerges from 'practices'; we must look at how human beings act in the world – in concrete, material situations – to understand how social reality gets its shape.

Despite this emphasis on practice, practical constructivism does not imply that the only methodological approach that is epistemologically valid is actual, in-field observations of what people do. As various studies have demonstrated – such as Cochoy's (2011) study of the rise of self-service grocery stores or Hagberg's (2016) study of the evolution of the shopping bag – gaining rich insights into how social phenomena are practically constructed does not necessitate directly observing concrete situations. The position of practical constructivism is less methodologically restrictive than so, advocating a plurality of methods to capture different dimensions of how the social phenomenon under study is 'done'. This means that there are different methods for different jobs and that the appropriateness of a method depends on what job it is mobilized to do. What dimension of the practical constitution of reality is of interest? For example, while field observations may provide a highly detailed account of how individual practices unfold, historical studies may be better suited for tracing how practices evolve and new ones emerge.

3.2 Research Context

My context for studying cultures of consumer information is the context of product reviews. Product reviews began their journey to becoming a mainstay of modern markets in the 1920s when consumer organizations in the US, including Consumer Reports, began conducting laboratory tests of products and publishing the results to the public (Glickman, 2001; Hilton, 2007; Rao, 1998; Silber, 1983). In recent years, the quantity of products reviews available to consumers has exploded, as the rise of the internet has led to the emergence of a new type of review: the online user review. De Langhe et al. (2016b, p. 850) call this development "the most important change to the consumer information environment in recent memory". Product reviews and product reviewing represent a fruitful context for studying cultures of consumer information because product reviews matter greatly for consumers' purchasing decisions (Simonson & Rosen, 2014). This context thus allows us to study how cultures of consumer information, by giving shape to the content and form of product reviews, intervene in markets. Put differently, cultures of product reviewing are interesting because the information that they offer – product reviews – is important to many consumers. But product reviews are also an interesting context because different types of reviews have been shown to offer conflicting information about products (Chen & Xie, 2008; de Langhe et al., 2016a). Such conflicts suggest that multiple cultures of consumer information are at work in producing the product reviews of modern markets. In this way, product reviews offer a promising context for mapping out what dimensions cultures of consumer information share but also how they differ within these dimensions.

3.3 Research Strategies

To understand how cultures of consumer information operate within markets, I pursue two distinct research strategies: a comparative case study strategy and a historical case study strategy. Below, I detail for what purposes these strategies were devised as well as what methods of data collection and analysis the strategies entailed.

3.3.1 Comparative Case Study

I employed a comparative case study strategy in order to respond to the question of how ideology shapes cultures of consumer information. I focused on two cultures of consumer information – the Danish consumer organization THINK and the ecommerce ecosystem of Amazon.com. The purpose of choosing a comparative design was to develop a theoretical framework that would allow us to explain how ideologies shape product reviews across different types of reviews.

The comparative design relied on cross-sectional data (Giesler & Thompson, 2016), meaning that the comparison revolved around snapshots of how the two cultures in question express ideologies in their review practices instead of diachronic data of how, for example, their reviewing practices have changed or instigated change. I chose to focus on snapshot-based data, as this strategy was primarily directed at 'dimensionalizing' (Spiggle, 1994, p. 494) the practical operations of cultures of consumer information and identify how their dimensions exhibit traces of ideological influence.

The cases of THINK and Amazon.com were chosen as they are both important producers of product reviews in their own right – THINK being the dominant consumer organization in Denmark and Amazon.com being the pioneer of the Customer Review. More than that, they represent two distinct types of reviews – expert reviews (THINK) and online user reviews (Amazon.com) – that have been shown to generate divergent reviews. Comparing the two cases thus provide a promising starting point for theorizing how cultures of consumer information differ and what their differences entail (e.g., in terms of shaping the product reviews they offer).

Semi-structured interviews provided the main body of data for the comparative study of THINK and Amazon.com. To shed light on the epistemic culture of THINK, I mainly interviewed the test managers who design their product tests. For the study of Amazon.com, I mainly interviewed user reviewers who regularly post reviews on Amazon.com. In both cases, the interviews centered around the procedures the interviewees employed for testing the performance of products, their criteria for evaluating performance, and their justifications for reviewing products this way. What I wanted to learn from this line of inquiry was what the members of the different cultures understand as the 'true' value of products and how they seek to capture this truth.

Relying on interviews as my main source of material for the epistemic practices of THINK and Amazon.com naturally also means that certain factors are likely to have remained undetected, even if they matter for how ideology is expressed within the practices of cultures of consumer information. I for example never set foot in the laboratories where THINK tests their product samples and I thus never got the chance to observe the role of the testing equipment in defining the value of products. In general, the interviews largely provided a reflexive account of the review practices of THINK and Amazon.com and were not geared towards addressing factors that were beyond or below the reviewers' reflexivity. The benefit of focusing on how the reviewers reflexively made sense of and justified their review practices was that their justifications provided a valuable window into their understandings of what the 'real' or 'true' value of products looks like and how such understandings reflect ideologically-based assumptions.

To study how the understandings of 'real' product value manifested themselves in and shaped the review practices of THINK and Amazon.com, I again relied on the interviews and the descriptions the interviewed reviewers provided of their reviewing procedures. I also, however, had to consult other material. This was most critical in the case of Amazon.com, as the user reviewers I interviewed only had knowledge of a limited set of the practices that make up Amazon.com's culture of consumer information. They could only tell me of their own reviewing procedures and not much about what goes on at Amazon.com, such as how Amazon.com processes the individual user reviews and turns them into an aggregate rating. For such information, I turned to the information pages of Amazon.com as well as media articles where Amazon.com spokespeople would explain how a product rating is made.

A final source of empirical material for comparing THINK and Amazon.com was historical documents. These documents were instrumental towards understanding the ideologies underlying each culture of consumer information. In the case of THINK, this concerned an archive of the THINK magazine, the first issue dating back to 1964, and for Amazon.com, I studied Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos' annual shareholder letters. The documents enabled me to get a sense of what had motivated the development of each type of review – the expert review and the online user review. From the perspective of which worldview did each type of review seem warranted? What system of ideas and ideals informed the creation of each culture of consumer information? Exploring these questions allowed me to further understand the ideological underpinnings of the practices of THINK and Amazon.com.

3.3.2 Historical Case Study

The comparative approach was designed to yield insights into how ideology shape cultures of consumer information by identifying the common ways ideology matters for how cultures of consumer information organize their knowledge practices. However, this approach was not able to tell me much about how different cultures of consumer information influence markets. Lacking was a diachronic (Thomas, 2011) or process perspective (Giesler & Thompson, 2016) that would allow me to trace the market outcomes set in motion by the knowledge practices of a particular culture of consumer information. For this reason, I adopted a historical case study strategy, revolving around methods such as archival research and oral history interviews, to identify the main mechanisms through which cultures of consumer information influence markets.

As my focal case, I chose THINK and sought to study how its particular way of reviewing products had influenced markets. The primary dataset was developed through constructing an archive of articles from the published magazines of THINK, dating back from 1964 until 2020. I browsed every page of every issue and scanned and archived the pages I deemed relevant to understand the reviewing practices of THINK and their outcomes. I collected a total of 7611 pages, which were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2012) for patterns characterizing how THINK does reviews and achieves market influence through reviewing.

I supplemented the archival dataset with two oral history interviews (Janesick, 2014) by long-term employees of THINK, who were able to contextualize and add depth to the findings emerging from the archival research.

While studying the magazine revealed important aspects of how the reviews of THINK intervened in the ordering of markets, the requirements of historical research (Gottschalk, 1969) necessitated expanding the dataset beyond data produced by THINK or its spokespeople. For example, THINK would have in interest in exaggerating its own accomplishments to convince consumers to sign up as paying members of THINK or to persuade policymakers to increase the public funding of THINK. I needed data that were not based on the perspective of THINK to properly evaluate the outcomes of the THINK reviews. I therefore first conducted semi-structured interviews with managers of retail stores, who were chosen because they have daily contact with consumers and thus possess knowledge of how consumers use the reviews of THINK in shopping situations. These interviews would, in this way, provide an account of the impact of the reviews on consumers. To learn more about how the reviews were influencing companies, I looked towards press releases of companies to trace how the companies responded to the reviews, both in terms of how they designed their products and communicated the benefits of the products to their customers and other stakeholders.

In the table below, I provide an overview of the strategies and data used in relation to each article of the thesis. The third article is not included since it is a conceptual article.

Table 1 Overview of the methodology of the PhD thesis

	Study aim	Research question	Research strategy	Dataset
Article 1	To understand how cultures of consumer express and enact ideology in their knowledge practices	How does ideology shape product reviews?	Comparative case study	- 16 semi-structured interviews - 24 Amazon shareholder letters (1998-2021) - 7611 pages from the THINK magazine (1964-2020)
Article 2	To understand how cultures of consumer information influence markets	How do consumer watchdog organizations change markets?	Historical case study	- 2 oral history interviews with THINK employees - 5 semi-structured interviews - Press releases from 3 child car seat manufacturers (2001-2019) - 7611 pages from the THINK magazine (1964-2020)

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4 How Ideologies Shape Product Reviews: Epistemic Regimes in Expert Reviews and Online User Reviews[4]

Mikkel Nøjgaard & Niklas Woermann

Abstract. How does ideology shape product reviews? For companies to appropriately respond to product reviews, they must know what influences the form and content of reviews. Extant literature has identified a variety of influences but has only paid scant attention to the role of cultural factors and particularly ideology in the shaping of reviews. Seeing that sociological analysis has revealed that knowledge production (including reviewing) is always ideological, we set out to explore the ideological shaping of two kinds of reviews, which often offer contrasting product ratings: online user reviews and expert reviews. We argue that ideologies shape practices of product reviewing by enabling and legitimating the definition of a system of normative assumptions that orient reviewing practices. We call these systems of assumptions 'epistemic regimes' and show that they can vary across three dimensions of assumptions: axiology (i.e., assumptions about what values product reviewing serves), ontology (i.e., assumptions about the basic nature of products), and epistemological (i.e., assumptions about how the nature of products can be revealed). The findings suggest that taking stock of the ideological underpinnings of reviews will greatly help companies to respond to them appropriately. Furthermore, by culturalizing the notion of product review validity, the findings advance the ongoing discussion on what type of reviews benefit consumers and, more generally, society most.

Keywords: product reviews, online user reviews, ideology, epistemic cultures, epistemic regimes

4.1 Introduction

Monitoring and responding to product reviews is a demanding, yet essential task for marketing managers. Negative reviews have been shown to negatively impact sales, market share, and brand value

[4] This chapter presents Article 1. A previous version of the article has been presented at the 2021 ACR conference. The article is expected to be submitted to *Journal of Marketing* within three months.

(Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Moe & Trusov, 2011; Zhu & Zhang, 2010). Therefore, managers need to consider possible responses such as making a public statement to confirm or refute results, take legal action, change or withdraw a product, or launch an advertising campaign to counter negative messages. The effects of positive reviews, in contrast, can be amplified to maximize benefits, used to attack competitors, or promote sales (Watson et al., 2018). Additionally, reviews are increasingly mined for information because they hold important clues for market intelligence, design leads, and consumer insight (Hou et al., 2019; Tirunillai & Tellis, 2014).

However, successfully monitoring, responding to, and learning from product reviews is complicated by a persistent problem: discrepancies between expert and user reviews. Experts have been shown to rate products differently compared to users across a wide range of product categories (Chen & Xie, 2008; de Langhe et al., 2016a). De Langhe et al. (2016b) point to the illustrative example of a pair of Beats headphones, which, at the time of their article, had received mediocre ratings from the experts at Consumer Reports, but quite positive ratings from users on Amazon.com. It is essential to understand where such differences come from for companies to figure out how to respond to the different types of reviews. For example, how does a company use reviews for product development if different types of reviews offer contrasting ratings and imply divergent development directions? Research has identified a long list of factors shaping reviews (e.g., 2012; Ma et al., 2013; Moe & Schweidel, 2012) but one potentially powerful category of factors has received only scarce attention, namely cultural influences such as values and norms. Kozinets et al. (2010, p. 87) point to the importance of attending to the "cultural complexity" of reviewing, showing how communal norms shape the content of reviews in their study of how bloggers review products.

In this article, we heed Kozinets et al.'s (2010) call for research into the cultural processes shaping product reviews and investigate an overlooked dimension influencing review procedures, outcomes, and effects: ideology. The link between ideology and product reviews deserves attention considering the long-standing strand of research on the ideological underpinnings of marketing (e.g., Crockett & Wallendorf, 2004; Press et al., 2014; Schmitt et al., 2021). What is more, the ideological shaping of reviews also calls for attention because product reviewing is a process of knowledge production, and marketing research has often shown how ideology shapes knowledge production processes, such as the production of marketing scholarship (Arndt, 1985; Fitchett et al., 2014; Hirschman, 1993) or market research (Arnould & Cayla, 2015; Bjerrisgaard & Kjeldgaard, 2020; Zwick & Cayla, 2011).

To understand the roots, main values, and key implications of ideology in product reviews, we offer a comparative study of the ideological subtext of expert and user reviews. Contrasting reviews conducted and published by a large consumer interest group with user reviews on Amazon.com, we make explicit ideological orientations of both systems of product reviewing. Crucially, beyond mapping out the ideologies that underlie reviews, we also trace how the ideologies shape the reviews and how reviews, in this way, come to promote the dominant values (e.g., consumer safety and welfare) of the ideologies behind them. Our study shows that understanding the ideological roots of expert and user reviews has implications for policy makers as well as marketing managers. Furthermore, managers and product developers striving to foster positive reviews need to understand the norms and values different product review systems implicitly prioritize and how they are operationalized in review procedures. Finally, when responding to negative or even unfair reviews by questioning the fairness or legitimacy of a review, managers must be aware of the ideologies from which product reviews draw their legitimacy. Powerful stakeholders such as consumer interest groups or review platforms do not operate in isolation form the ideological fabric of society, and effectively engaging with them requires managers to take ideology into account in an increasingly politicized market environment.

The article is organized as follows. First, we review extant literature on the factors that shape product reviews and, on this basis, develop a theoretical framework, rooted in the notion of 'epistemic cultures' (Knorr-Cetina, 1999), that can account for how product reviews express ideologies. We then present our methodological design, a comparative case study of the review system of Amazon.com and a Danish consumer interest organization, representing online user reviews and expert reviews respectively. Next, the findings are presented, after which we discuss the theoretical implications for issues such as the validity of reviews as well as the managerial lessons of our findings.

4.2 Theory

4.2.1 Product Reviews and Ideology

Research on what shapes product reviews has identified various factors of influence, such as the availability and content of past reviews (Godes & Silva, 2012; Ma et al., 2013; Moe & Schweidel, 2012; Moe & Trusov, 2011; Schlosser, 2005), the experience and expertise of reviewers (Corciolani et al., 2020), and the implementation of management strategies (e.g., writing responses to user reviews (Wang & Chaudhry, 2018) or adjusting prices (Kuksov & Xie, 2010)). While these factors can help us understand why expert and user reviews differ in their ratings, research has yet to account for a number of important cultural differences between expert and user reviews that might hold important clues to marketing managers and policy makers.

Even though the core purpose of product reviews is to describe product attributes and assess product value, even a cursory look at product reviews by either experts or users will show that they are replete with contextual information about the review procedure, the author of the review, the purpose of reviewing, assumptions about the target consumer and scenarios of use. While this information is contextual in that it does not directly pertain to product features, prior research suggests that it serves important functions in terms of explaining and legitimizing reviews, thereby securing their effects on consumers and markets. Kozinets et al. (2010) have in their study of bloggers' sponsored product reviews called attention to distinctly 'cultural' forms of influence, homing in on 'communal norms' and values as important forces that shape product reviews. They argue that bloggers must tailor their review to the norms of the communities they are communicating to, if the reviews are to be perceived as credible. For example, even though bloggers' reviews often are promotional in nature, being sponsored by companies, bloggers must be careful of engaging in "commercial 'hype'" if the audience belongs to a community "whose norms are resistant to profit motives and the logics of the marketplace" (Kozinets et al., 2010, p. 85). Other communities are accepting of market logics and thus welcome hype.

Kozinets et al. (2010) specifically point to the importance of ideology within product reviewing. Text or knowledge is ideological if it reflects a "value-and-belief system" (Hirschman, 1993, p. 538) that asserts normative assumptions about truth, society, and the good life. The norms that Kozinets et al. (2010) identify spring from a more general system of ideas and ideals that inform people's understanding of market actors and what counts as appropriate behavior within markets. For example, the resistance towards market logics is based on a set of assumptions about the motives of companies.

While Kozinets et al. (2010) thereby demonstrate the relevance of attending to the ideologies at play within processes of product reviewing, they stop short of providing a systematic framework that allows us to explore how ideologies and the norms they imply contribute to giving product reviews their shape. Kozinets et al. (2010, p. 86) for example state that their study focuses on "one particular dimension [of norms that influence reviews] – the resistance and acceptance of commercial values", concluding that "a range of other norms and values could be explored, classified, and related to particular outcomes". We follow Kozinets et al.'s (2016, p. 836) call for research on "the social and cultural realities of consumer-generated online ratings" and contribute to our understanding of the role of ideologies in product reviewing in three key ways.

First, we go beyond existing research by not only focusing on the role of ideologies and norms in the shaping of *user reviews* but also in the shaping of *expert reviews*. By comparing a system of expert reviews to a system of user reviews, we explore how ideology matters not for one specific type of product reviews but for all product reviews more generally.

Second, doing so also means that our research is not only attentive to 'communal norms' within the communities that are on receiving ends of reviews (the focus of Kozinets et al. (2010)). We are instead interested in the broader political market ideologies ingrained into the knowledge practices making up the product review systems we study. Past research has established that knowledge is always ideological (Hirschman, 1993) and that ideology governs the practices of companies (Press et al., 2014). And yet we know little of how the ideologies ingrained in the major product review systems of modern markets – like Amazon.com or Consumer Reports – govern their reviewing practices and shape the product knowledge they offer.

Third, our research focuses on how ideology has implications for how actors conceive of the validity of product reviews. Past research has tended to understand validity as a set of universal and therefore non-cultural criteria that that all review types must meet in order to qualify as valid (e.g., objectiveness (de Langhe et al., 2016a)). We treat validity as a cultural construct, exploring how reviewers and other members of review systems understand and enact review validity.

4.2.2 Epistemic Cultures

To conceptualize the articulation of ideology through product reviews, we turn to epistemic cultures. The notion of epistemic cultures stems from the field of Science and Technology Studies and refers to "machineries of knowledge construction" (Knorr-Cetina, 1999, p. 3) or the patterned ways that scientists construct and warrant knowledge. Epistemic cultures merit attention because they do not simply 'discover' the world existing 'out there' but rather contributes to constructing it through their particular epistemic practices. Knowledge, in this view, is a social construction, contingent on the cultures in which it is created.

Knorr-Cetina (1999) originally coined the term to address the disunity of the sciences. By mapping the epistemic cultures of different scientific disciplines, she demonstrated that the sciences do not represent a unified attempt to map out reality but rather construct various, at times incommensurable, versions of reality. Reality, in this view, is "an interiorized system of reference and [is] not shared across disciplines" (Knorr-Cetina & Reichmann, 2015, p. 874). Consider how the discipline of economics conceives of and tries to 'capture' reality:

> Economists […] think of the economy in terms of 'fundamentals,' which on a macroeconomic level are factors like interest rates, GDP growth, the trade balance and deficit, inflation levels, and so on. These factors indicate an underlying reality […] Real-time economic transactions and their meanings for people – in other words, everyday reality – is not the baseline from which such fields start. Rather one starts with 'measures,' variables with causal powers which describe the being of an economy. (Knorr-Cetina & Reichmann, 2015, p. 874)

The disunity of epistemic cultures exists across various dimensions. First and foremost, Knorr-Cetina (1999) emphasizes that epistemic cultures may differ in their approach to identifying their object of study. What dimensions does reality consist of and, hence, what dimensions make sense to study? For example, where an economist approaches markets as a set of 'fundamentals', anthropologists understand markets as occurring in market actors' lived experiences of markets. Just as disciplines may be disunified in their conceptions of epistemic objects, so too may they diverge in their conception of epistemic subjects. Epistemic cultures are often organized around contrasting conceptions of who possesses the epistemic authority to declare something as 'real' and the processes that epistemic subjects must undertake to gain access to 'reality'.

It is fruitful to approach product reviews as constructed by epistemic cultures. This means taking the view that different product review systems do not work in a unified way to uncover the 'real' value of products but operate with their own conception of products, how they should be studied, who should study them, and which processes are necessary to assure the accuracy of knowledge. In this perspective, we would understand the bloggers studied by Kozinets et al. (2010) and the affiliated community as an epistemic culture, as you here find a set of cultural particularities that influence how products end up being reviewed, one of these particularities being 'communal norms'. The notion of epistemic cultures gives us license to explore ideologies as inherent features of the product review process rather than treating them as sources of 'distortion' that threaten the validity of the reviews.

4.2.3 Epistemic Regimes

To provide a more systematic framework for understanding how ideologies shape epistemic cultures and the product reviews they produce, we develop the notion of 'epistemic regimes'. Epistemic regimes are discursively constructed systems of normative assumptions that govern practices of generating and warranting knowledge about products, in our case review practices. Epistemic regimes govern reviewing by setting boundaries with regard to which product dimensions need or need not to be included in a review (for example price, safety, or sustainability criteria). Epistemic regimes also govern reviewing by prescribing sources of legitimacy of certain epistemic procedures or epistemic subjects.

Ideologies, in turn, orient and legitimate epistemic regimes. Ideologies, understood as systems of ideas and ideals that form worldviews or a "common horizon" (Press et al., 2014, p. 104), provide those unquestioned assumptions about the nature of consumers, producers, and markets without which product reviewing would not be possible. Product reviewing must start with certain assumptions; it must take certain things for granted in order to justify its basic claims about truth, adequacy, and relevance of the measures taken and ultimately the knowledge produced. For example, reviews of orange juice must either be done by sensory experts or by lay consumers (or both); and the results obtained will be advertised as legitimate and trustworthy in the review text by arguing that the method used is adequate and correct. The commitment to either one of these positions is justified by reference to various rarely articulated assumptions about the nature of the product (for example, is the value of the product captured solely through taste-based criteria or should the shelf life of the juice or the ease-of-use of the packaging also be taken into account?) and the status of experts and lay consumers as epistemic subjects (for example, how qualified are consumers for ascertaining the 'real' value of juice?). In summary, ideologies shape product reviews by enabling and legitimating epistemic regimes, which in turn govern how epistemic cultures create knowledge about products.

Through our empirical analysis, we find that epistemic regimes cover three kinds of assumptions: axiological (i.e., assumptions regarding the purpose of reviewing), ontological (i.e., assumptions regarding the basic nature of market entities, including products), and epistemological (i.e., assumptions regarding what qualifies as 'true' knowledge). In the analysis, we show how these assumptions articulate the underlying ideologies of the review institutions we study and, by extension, how their reviews reflect and reproduce their ideologies.

4.3 Methods and Materials

To explore how product reviews express ideologies, we pursue a comparative case study strategy. A comparative case study allows us to trace what difference ideology makes for how review practices are organized within product review systems. We take our empirical point of departure in the cases of Amazon.com, representing online user reviews, and the Danish consumer interest organization THINK, representing expert reviews.

Amazon.com was chosen because it is a leading ecommerce platform and is often said to have pioneered the customer review (Brandt, 2011), being one of the first platforms to give consumers the option to share their opinions about products online. On Amazon.com, consumers can award products a 'star-rating' (from one to five) along with a written evaluation of the product. On the website, the individual ratings of consumers are aggregated into an overall star-rating, which is listed, along with the individual reviews, on each product page.

THINK is the leading consumer organization in Denmark and has published a consumer magazine featuring comparative product tests and product reviews since 1964. THINK resembles other consumer organizations, such as *Which?* (UK), *Consumer Reports* (US), and *Stiftung Warentest* (Germany), in their approach to product reviewing, and most (but not all) of the product reviews THINK publishes are carried out in collaboration with these organizations under the auspices of the *International Consumer Research and Testing* (ICRT). When producing their reviews, THINK selects and buys a number of products within a given product category (usually the bestselling ones), which it then sends to a contracted laboratory. The laboratory then conducts a series of tests following a test program designed by THINK. In the final step of the reviewing process, THINK turns the raw lab results into a set of ratings, which reflects how the product performed in different dimensions of the test. THINK also calculates an overall rating by attributing different weights to the different test dimensions. These ratings, and a written description of the most relevant findings of the test results, are then published in the THINK magazine and on their website.

For exploring the epistemic regimes underlying THINK and Amazon.com we rely on a varied dataset consisting of different types of qualitative data. We designed the dataset so that it allowed us to both capture the ideologies behind THINK and Amazon.com and the epistemic regimes arising from these ideologies. For studying ideology, we were attentive to how central actors within the review systems make sense of their environments: How do they understand consumers? What problems do they understand consumers to be experiencing? And what role do they ascribe to companies and the market more generally in creating or correcting these problems? Our analysis of the ideologies is based on historical documents – the THINK magazine in the case of THINK and shareholder letters in the case of Amazon.com – as these documents give rich insights into the ideologies that were central to the creation of the two review systems under study and that they continue to rest on.

For exploring the epistemic consequences of the underlying ideologies – that is, how the ideologies shape the epistemic regimes that organize the review practices of THINK and Amazon.com – we relied on interviews with central actors in the review processes, as well as a sample of reviews from each review institution. We analyzed the interviews and reviews to explore how the underlying ideologies were reflected in the epistemic practices of the review systems.

The different types of data and their analytical purpose are described in the tables below.

Table 2: Amazon.com dataset

Dataset	**Description**	**Purpose**
6 interviews with Amazon reviewers.	The interviewed reviewers were all part of the Amazon-organized program Amazon Vine, which is a program where Amazon.com allows companies to send free products to the most trusted and honest Amazon reviewers in return for their reviews. We were interested in these reviewers due to their reviewing experience and the increased likelihood that they had reflected on how they do reviews.	To understand the reviewing practices of user reviewers.
1 interview with a former Amazon employee.	The interviewee was a former product category leader at Amazon UK, who had collaborated with Amazon's customer review department.	To understand the organizational structure of the Amazon.com review system.
Official communication from Amazon.com.	Pages visited covered: - Web pages Amazon.com's reviewing practices - Product pages (featuring user reviews and ratings) - 25 shareholder letters - 1 speech given by Jeff Bezos at public events - 5 media articles featuring statements from Amazon spokespeople	- To understand the practices that make up the review system of Amazon.com - To understand how central Amazon.com actors justify their review practices and identify the ideology underlying their justifications
3 Amazon.com patents.	3 patents filed by Amazon.com available through Google Patents.	To understand the technological features of the Amazon review system and what motivated these features.

Table 3: THINK dataset

Dataset	**Description**	**Purpose**
8 interviews with current or former THINK employees	We interviewed: - 4 test mangers - 2 heads of the test department (one of them currently holding a high position within ICRT) - 1 market researcher - 1 journalistic employee	- To understand the product reviewing practices of THINK. - To understand how THINK employees justify their review practices and the ideologies underlying these justifications.
Product tests	We studied both the tests that were featured in the magazine and those on THINK's website.	To understand how the product reviews of THINK are communicated.
THINK magazine, 1964-2020 (7611scanned pages)	We studied the editorials and other relevant articles which features THINK's opinions regarding market developments	To understand the ideology underlying THINK

4.4 Market Ideologies

The epistemic regimes that govern the review practices of Amazon.com and THINK are rooted in distinct ideologies that relate to the nature of consumers, companies, and capitalism. These ideologies become particularly palpable by examining the historical contexts from which Amazon.com and THINK have emerged.

The ideology underlying THINK can be characterized as 'progressive liberalism'. The organizational form on which THINK is modeled emerged in the United States in the 1920s when consumer organizations began testing products to protect consumers from deceitful advertising practices and harmful products, which were prevalent problems of the market at that time. According to Glickman (2001), these organizations were ideologically rooted in American Progressivism and its belief in deploying science to achieve social reform and a more just society. The organizations believed that its technocratic measures were necessary to make markets fairer and more transparent. They challenged two dominant views of consumer society at the time. They opposed both the view of "consumer triumphalism", which positions consumer society as "proof of America's unique greatness", and the view of "consumer defeatism", which "defines consumer society as a totalizing and wholly negative force" (Glickman, 2001, p. 115). Finding a middle-ground between these two views, the consumer organizations believed in capitalist markets as a source of social goods but also called for technocratic oversight to keep capitalist markets on the right path. We see this view clearly articulated in the pages of the THINK magazine:

> "If society is to function in a reasonable fashion it is unacceptable that for example a number of business organizations has such a big direct and indirect influence on consumers' choices. We must recognize that the free consumption choice, which is the foundation for capitalist society, is not working as it should, thanks to price agreements, the influence of advertising, and so on." (1976(6), p. 2)

The skepticism towards free markets stems from a view of consumers as vulnerable, manipulable, and hence prone to being persuaded away from the path of rationality. Glickman (2001, p. 110) notes that expert-testing organizations have from their origin "distrusted the wisdom of the average consumer, whom they considered ignorant, impetuous, and naïve." We see a similar view articulated in the THINK magazine:

> [T]he industry as a whole does what it can to turn consumers into uniform, robot-like buyers of its products. Advertising, which pours out upon us from all sides, appeals to a great extent to the forces within us that make us nonautonomous and uncritical. The snobbery, the envy, the emulation of our neighbors, the insecurity. (THINK, 1971(5), p. 2)

The ideology underlying Amazon.com and the online user review is very different. We refer to this ideology as 'techno-liberalism'. The online user review was pioneered by Amazon.com in the 1990s and is one of the innovations to emerge from a movement of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs bent on "inventing the tools needed to create a 'free market' within cyberspace" (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996, p. 53). The central idea of this ideology is that "the convergence of the media, computing and telecommunications will produce an electronic marketplace" (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996, p. 53) and replace monopolies with competition. Amazon.com embodies the belief that, while free markets may not be naturally occurring, they can be constructed through the means of digital technology and, once constructed, should not be interfered with.

An essential element of techno-liberalism is a "distrust of vertical authority" (Malaby, 2009, p. 16), which is clearly reflected in Amazon.com's stance on gatekeepers or experts meddling in markets. Digitally-constructed free markets are assumed to "liberate creativity and innovation" (Fourcade & Healy, 2007, p. 290) to the benefit of society, as the following statement by Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos reflects:

> Even well meaning gatekeepers slow innovation. When a platform is self-service, even the improbable ideas can get tried, because there's no *expert gatekeeper* ready to say 'that will never work!' And guess what—many of those improbable ideas do work, and society is the beneficiary of that diversity. (Bezos, 2012)

The view of the consumer embedded in techno-liberalism is that consumers are endowed with a strong sense of rationality, which means that they are resistant to being 'duped' by advertisers into desiring things that will not benefit them. Bezos articulates this view clearly when he explains the rationale behind Amazon.com's well-known mantra of obsessing over customers:

> We hold as axiomatic that customers are perceptive and smart, and that brand image follows reality and not the other way around. (Bezos, 1998a)

What is more, in this view, consumers' longing for things that extend beyond their basic material needs is not something to be kept in check but rather something to be encouraged, as it drives societal development. Consumer desire and the perpetual discontent that comes envying and emulating others is a driver of market capitalism and not a bug that needs correcting for capitalism to work, as Bezos explains in one of his shareholder letters:

> One thing I love about customers is that they are divinely discontent. Their expectations are never static – they go up. It's human nature. We didn't ascend from our hunter-gatherer days by being satisfied. People have a voracious appetite for a better way, and yesterday's 'wow' quickly becomes today's 'ordinary'. I see that cycle of improvement happening at a faster rate than ever before. (Bezos, 2017)

In summary, the ideologies underlying product reviews at THINK and Amazon both portray markets as a potentially positive force. But progressive liberalism and techno-liberalism differ in their view of what it takes to make markets fulfil this role in society, a difference of views that is rooted in differing understandings of the nature of consumers, companies, and capitalism. In the writings of THINK, consumers are vulnerable, companies are deceptive, and capitalism requires technocratic oversight to produce social goods. Within the review system of Amazon, by contrast, consumers are rational, companies exist to help consumers fulfil their sovereign desires, and capitalism works best without intervention.

How do these ideologies manifest themselves in the epistemic practices of THINK and Amazon.com? We find that the ideologies do so by enabling the definition of a system of normative assumptions – what we call an epistemic regime – that in turn govern the organization of product review practices. Epistemic regimes vary across three dimensions of assumptions, which all are ideologically shaped: axiological, ontological, and epistemological assumptions.

4.5 Axiological Assumptions

First, the underlying ideology of THINK and Amazon.com is expressed as an axiology, or a set of values, in the epistemic regimes that govern their review practices. This axiology guides actors within the review systems of Amazon.com and THINK in answering what problems within markets product reviews are supposed to hep rectify. The axiology of epistemic regimes, on other words, governs review practices by installing a sense of purpose into these practices.

4.5.1 Protecting Consumer Welfare

Within the epistemic regime that underlies THINK, the prime purpose of product reviewing is to protect ‘consumer welfare’, that is, the safety and basic material well-being of consumers. The ideological view of consumers as vulnerable and easily manipulated means that reviews must serve as a bastion of consumer rationality. Reviews are intended to protect consumers from poor and hazardous products and steer them away from the superficial, more style-based values often promoted by advertising, which, for THINK, amounts to living a ‘hollow’ life:

> If a consumer wishes to drive himself to the poor house in an oversized and chrome-plated status symbol of a car, he shall not hear one critical word from us. Nor are we offended by the consumer who feels his confidence grow with the amount of pomade in his hair. But it is not our job to tell consumers how they can let themselves be brought into uniformity and replace a free and independent life with hollow values. We are here to orient consumers towards the real values in goods (1968(6), 2)

Reviews are, in this sense, meant to ‘awaken’ consumers. They should guide consumers in identifying the values that really matter – namely the functional utility of products – and enable them to compare products based on these values. In short, reviews should serve as a moral blueprint for how consumers can consume in line with a fulfilling life.

4.5.2 Promoting Consumer Satisfaction

The axiology of the epistemic regime governing the review system of Amazon.com is strongly articulated in Amazon.com’s mantra to ‘obsess over customers’. In his communication to the stakeholders of Amazon.com, Bezos places the purpose of satisfying consumers’ wants at the heart of everything the company does:

> Our vision is to use this platform to build Earth's most customer-centric company, a place where customers can come to find and discover anything and everything they might want to buy online. (Bezos, 1999)

This axiology is aligned with the view that consumers are rational and cognitively capable of recognizing value when they see it, as reflected in how Bezos describes the customers of Amazon.com:

> I constantly remind our employees to be afraid, to wake up every morning terrified. Not of our competition, but of our customers. […] [W]e consider them to be loyal to us – right up until the second that someone else offers them a better service. (Bezos, 1998a)

We here see the ideological assumption that companies exist to serve consumers, not deceive them. This also means that consumers' desires are thought not to be imposed on them; they are, indeed, *their* desires. Consumers are not in need of being awakened to the 'real' values of goods but are already wide awake. It is therefore not the task of product reviews to alter consumers' desires and protect them from living a 'hollow' life. Reviews should instead signal how well a product satisfies the values consumers themselves identify as important, even if these values do not revolve around safety or material well-being.

Summarizing the axiological differences described above, the axiology governing the review system of THINK states that product reviews should protect consumers from the manipulative practices of companies and guide them towards evaluating products for their ability to enhance their welfare. The axiology expressed in the language of Amazon.com, on the other hand, is based on the ideological view that consumers are not so easily manipulated and can figure out what constitutes a good product – and a good life – on their own. Therefore, reviews should take their point of departure in consumers' self-defined desires and reflect how well products satisfy those desires. In short, where the protection of consumer welfare sits as the ultimate objective of reviews of THINK, Amazon.com is guided by the idea that reviewing should be in the service of promoting consumer satisfaction.

4.6 Ontological Assumptions

The different ideologies of THINK and Amazon.com also manifest in ontological differences and, more specifically, differences in the ontology of product value. By ontology, we here mean “the claims or assumptions that are made about the nature of social reality, claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other” (Blaikie, 2009, p. 8). By extension, the ontology of product value refers to the assumptions made about what makes products valuable and hence what dimensions of products are appropriate to take into account when evaluating product value.

4.6.1 Product Value as Comparative Functionality

The ontological consequence of the axiology of consumer welfare is to conceive of product value as ‘comparative functionality’. Functionality takes on ontological weight, because it is the functional attributes of products that matter for how well they perform tasks essential for consumer welfare. The functionality of a product, however, is only deemed relevant to the extent that it is comparable to other product and reveals how it differs from those products. The ‘real’ dimensions of products are those that differentiate products and enable consumers to compare the functionality of products, as these dimensions allow consumers to choose the product that maximizes their welfare. This ontology is clearly reflected in the way THINK designs its test programs. Consider for example how THINK designs its tests for child car seats:

> Well, in reality it’s about finding the level where we can say that we… Well, in a crash test it’s about how fast and how violent you make the accident. And if the accident is violent enough, we break everything, no matter what seat it is. Then we can’t see any differences because they have all been broken to splinters. That doesn’t make any sense. And if you do it too gently, then they all make it without problems. So, we are trying to find, well, a level where we can actually see some differences, where we can separate the good from the bad. (Grethe, THINK test manager)

The ontology of comparative functionality is not only evident in how THINK designs the test criteria but also in how these criteria are weighed in calculating the overall product rating. Here, the THINK test managers seek to avoid what they call 'blurred' test results, where products are difficult to compare. A central method for ensuring comparability is the weighing of test criteria. THINK test managers sometimes choose to give more weight to the parameters where, in the words of one of the managers, "we can see a greater differentiation among the products" (Stine, THINK test manager). Another test manager adds:

> […] sometimes we may be measuring too many parameters and also give too many parameters weight, which can result in a somewhat blurred overall result, okay. Because the individual parameters can be contradictory […] Then [all the products] just become, like, 'good'. Then there aren't any that stick out completely in either end. So, it's actually – it's a bit of an art, I think, giving really good weightings and figuring out how many parameters there are. (Tobias, THINK test manager)

The ontological orientation towards comparative functionality is furthermore expressed in THINK's use of 'restrictive criteria'. Restrictive criteria is a way of installing the product dimensions most relevant for consumer welfare as the prime criteria of comparison. When operationalized as restrictive criteria, these dimensions serve as a ceiling for the overall rating, meaning that regardless of how strongly a product performs in other dimensions, it cannot exceed the rating granted to it for its performance in the restrictive dimension. Consider test manager Susanne's explanation of how restrictive criteria are used:

> Well, because if you have a test with a lot of parameters, then everything gets incredibly blurry […] And then they all become alike […] [And] it doesn't really reflect what you think you are seeing when you are looking at the test results, and then you just have to say, okay, some things are just… for example flame retardants or pinch hazards, which if I just let them stay where they are in terms of their [original] weighting never would have an impact [on the overall product rating]. Then you got to say, okay, we

have to make some restrictions here [i.e., emphasizing the importance of such parameters by using them as restrictive criteria].

Finally, the ontological assumption that the reality of products lies in their comparative functionality can be gleaned from the hesitation of THINK to change their test programs:

> When you change the test program, then the results are not comparable anymore, you know. And that's often a problem, you know, because […] then there are some [of the partners of the test] that would like to keep these products [that have already been tested], because it would be a shame to start over […] And others think it's really important that we just say, that's it, we are starting over, we are changing everything. And that's always a balancing act. (Tobias, THINK test manager)

In this way, the commitment to comparative functionality for example also means that THINK will be reluctant to consider novel features of products until these features become normal or relatively widespread within the product category, as new features challenge the direct comparability of products.

4.6.2 Product Value as Satisfactory Functionality

Something that stands out when comparing how Amazon.com reviewers and the test managers of THINK explain their review procedures is that both express that they seek to assess the functionality of products. The interviewed Amazon.com reviewers explain how they are trying to not let style-based attributes influence their reviews (e.g., the color of a shirt) and instead focus on the functional attributes of the product. On the surface, then, the ontologies underlying the reviews of THINK and Amazon.com seem similar; within both review systems, the value of products is ontologically rooted in their functionality. However, on closer scrutiny, it becomes clear that the ideology behind Amazon.com and the axiological emphasis on consumer satisfaction implies an ontology different from the one expressed in the reviews of THINK. Where the ontology governing the construction of THINK reviews emphasizes comparative functionality, the ontology expressed in Amazon reviews emphasizes ‘satisfactory functionality’, giving ontological weight to any product attribute that has an impact on consumers’ satisfaction with products.

We clearly see this ontology reflected in the way Amazon reviewers explain their reasoning behind their product evaluations. Here, they stress that the value they are trying to assess is the extent to which the functionality of products satisfies their expectations:

> […] part of writing a review is your expectations versus reality, I call it. You know, […] I’ve seen headphones that are advertised as having active noise cancelling […] but it’s not cancelling noise when you’re listening to music […] [T]hey’ll falsely advertise it and make it sound like it’s an expensive noise cancelling headphone that blocks out all the noise when you’re listening to music. […] And I will definitely mention that in a review. I will definitely, uhm, reduce the number of stars for that for sure. (Tim, Amazon reviewer)

This ontology also implies that product dimensions need not be directly comparable to qualify as ‘real’. In fact, the interviewed Amazon reviewers often explicitly refrained from basing their product reviews on comparisons. Take Tim, who “try to judge things as far as what they are”, arguing that “you can’t compare everything to a Rolls-Royce. It is what it is”. This ontology contrasts strongly with the ontology of comparative functionality. Within the epistemic regime underlying Amazon.com, the value of products is not assumed to stem from their functional superiority to other products, as is the case with THINK, but rather from how well they match consumers’ expectations to them.

The ontological rooting of product value in satisfactory functionality is particularly clear when the interviewed Amazon reviewers explain how they vary their evaluation criteria according to their different expectations to different products:

> Like, I would say, probably, […] [a five-star product is] just what an Apple strives for, where the box is gorgeous and the packaging is gorgeous and everything remarkable, but *since that’s their standard, I*

> *would still consider that a four-star product, because that's what you expect from Apple*. But if somebody else, say JBL, comes out with a product that's just super all way, from start to finish and I'm knocked out how easy it is to pair, how quickly it recharges, how long it holds a charge. Just ticking off the list of things that I would look for in a product if I were buying it and if it fills more boxes than I have, then I would give it a five star. (Ricky, Amazon reviewer)

The ontology of satisfactory functionality is also evident when considering the role of marketing claims in the review process. Consider how Grant evaluated a pair of headphones:

> […] the criteria that has to pass with me is, number one, it does what it says on the tin. […] What they claim is number one for me. […] Is it a good product in that, the sound quality is really good, the mic quality is also really good, picks up my husky voice, I've been told. Uhm, but the comfort of the product isn't, so as a result of that I pointed out that it was a fantastic product, with regards to sound quality, however *the comfort of the product was less than satisfactory considering it was advertised as something that was to be used in a work environment and the pictures were of, of men and women, you know working in a busy office*. It's like, no, you wouldn't wear them, you would wanna have ears of rock to wear this for more than two hours, because it does get very uncomfortable and it applies pressure to your cranium, which again, after a couple of hours it gets uncomfortable. So, it lost at least one star (Grant, Amazon reviewer, emphasis added)

This marks a stark difference to the epistemic regime governing THINK. Here, the ontology of comparative functionality sees the organization try to completely divorce marketing claims from the evaluation of product value. This ontology implies that products are to be evaluated based on their welfare-enhancing functions, regardless of the functions that advertising attempts to accentuate. The epistemic regime of Amazon.com, on the other hand, turns advertising claims into an inherent part of the evaluation process, as advertising shapes consumers' expectations and thus their experience of satisfaction. Advertising is not ignored but becomes a benchmark against which functionality is measured.

We also see the importance of satisfactory functionality for defining the ontological boundaries of products when we look at which product dimensions are ontologically elevated. Within the review system of Amazon.com, for example, price is an important dimension of product value. Product prices shape what consumers think they can reasonably expect from a product. Ricky for example explains how he evaluates products very positively if they are "half the price of the big names" and at the same time "as good or better than the [big] brand name". Low prices may lower expectations and thus the criteria that products must meet for a positive evaluation. Price, by shaping expectations, thus often plays an important role in product evaluations.

The importance of price is also amplified on the website of Amazon.com, which openly encourages price competition. As Bezos explains in one of his shareholder letters, price is central to delivering satisfying consumer experience:

> We share our prime real estate—our product detail pages—with third parties, and, *if they can offer better value*, we let them. One of our most exciting peculiarities [of Amazon.com] is poorly understood. People see that we're determined to offer both world-leading customer experience and the lowest possible prices, but to some this dual goal seems paradoxical if not downright quixotic. (Bezos, 2002)

What is more, "relentlessly lowering prices" has since 2001 been one of Amazon's three core "pillars of customer experience" (the other ones being selection and convenience) (Bezos, 2001).

The inclusion of price in the evaluation of product value contrasts strongly with the epistemic regime governing THINK. Here, as affordability is divorced from comparative functionality, price is treated as ontologically distinct from product value and therefore kept out of product evaluations. While THINK is not dismissive of the importance of affordability to consumers' material well-being, it cautions that affordability shares an uneasy relationship with consumer welfare:

> It seems that over the last 10 years we have made our purchasing decisions dependent on affordability instead of emphasizing quality […] If we to a greater extent emphasized quality, we might initially have to invest more, but this extra expense would later benefit the individual and society. […] [A]s consumers we must realize that we also have an influence on both products and advertising. We must make an effort ourselves to demand products of quality if we want to shape the market […] [O]nly this way can we hope that the price competition does not become too dominant, but that quality also becomes a decisive competitive factor. (1980(3), p. 2)

4.7 Epistemological Assumptions

The final dimension of epistemic regimes that is shaped by ideology is epistemology. We understand epistemology as consisting "of ideas about what can count as knowledge, what can be known, and what criteria such knowledge must satisfy in order to be called knowledge rather than beliefs" (Blaikie, 2009, p. 8). The epistemology of epistemic regimes of product reviewing refers to ideas about what qualifies as knowledge about products and their value, as well as who holds the epistemic authority to legitimately make knowledge claims about products. In our study, we see how the ideologies underlying THINK and Amazon.com give rise to a set of assumptions about which market actors are suited for making epistemic claims and the procedures they must perform to justify their claims.

4.7.1 Technocratic Experimentalism

THINK is committed to a basic epistemological position we may call 'experimentalism'. It is based on the belief that the truth of products arises through putting products through empirical experiments. Because THINK is oriented towards uncovering the link between products and consumer welfare, products must 'prove themselves' and their likely effects on consumers' material well-being in product tests.

Not any kinds of experiment will do, however. THINK adheres to a position of 'technocratic experimentalism', which is rooted in THINK's limited confidence in consumers to rationally evaluate whether products promote their welfare:

> We conclude that our product tests are perhaps perceived as an attempt to deprive housewives the ability to think for themselves. And that may very well be true. When we test products, it is indeed based on a sense that neither housewives nor other consumers on their own can figure out how many vitamins there are in a bottle of blackcurrant juice or how the machinery under a hood is going to work in the long run. You can also, with a little good will, call it an act of nannying when we tell consumers which life jackets will save their lives and which they in all likelihood will sink to the bottom with. If this informational enterprise is an expression of a misanthropic attitude towards consumers, that is something we must accept. (1969(9), p. 2)

'Technocratic' refers to a belief in the principles of science for arriving at the truth of products. When THINK test managers justify the validity of their reviews, they emphasize that rigor, reproducibility, and a controlled experiment environment are necessary to tell consumers whether product will enhance their welfare. From the perspective of THINK, these factors distinguish THINK's tests from the so-called tests that many modern media, such as newspapers and magazines, today feature, of which "far too many […] are based on a fragile foundation" (2006(65), p. 2). For THINK, "a 'test' means much more" (2006(65), p. 2). It means a test conducted with rigor in a controlled environment and generating reproducible results.

The epistemological position of technocratic experimentalism elevates the experts of THINK as the ultimate judges of product value. This is especially evident in cases where THINK assesses products in ways that conflict with how ordinary consumers assess products, such as in the case of child car seats. Consider Grethe's explanation of why THINK attributes equal importance to safety and usability in rating car seats:

> And these two – I mean, the safety test and the usability test – they actually weight equally [in our rating] and *many of our members struggle to understand that* because they think that the safety test, well, that is the most important one. But the thing about car seats is that if you don't manage to install it correctly, then it's not as safe as you thought (Grethe, THINK test manager)

This example clearly reflects how the epistemology of technocratic experimentalism promotes the idea that the technical expertise of THINK test managers (e.g., knowledge of what causes injuries in traffic accidents) gives them epistemic authority to overrule the commonsensical and intuitive assessments of ordinary consumers.

4.7.2 Democratic Experimentalism

The epistemic regime articulated in the review practices of Amazon.com also promotes an epistemology anchored in experimentalism. The value of products is to be revealed by empirically testing them. But in complete contrast to the epistemology governing how THINK review products, the epistemology underlying Amazon.com stresses that the truth value of reviews stems from the fact that they are *not* conducted by experts but rather by regular consumers. We see this epistemology in how Amazon.com spokespeople have defended their reviews against criticisms pointing to the lack of rigor and validity of these reviews:

> "Amazon customer reviews reflect the feedback, tastes and concerns of *real customers, not professional reviewers*. That's what makes them powerful" (Streitfeld, 2016).

We may call this epistemological position 'democratic experimentalism', as it stresses the truth value of the decentralized and pooled 'experiments' of consumers. The review system of Amazon.com is founded on the belief that the open and equal (or democratic) participation of consumers in the epistemic process is likely to produce truthful outcomes, as long as the voices of consumers remain uncensored. This epistemological assumption was central to the establishment of the Customer Review, back when Amazon.com was only selling books, as Jeff Bezos explains:

> And one of the things that surprises people […] is that we let people enter *negative* reviews. And [publishers and authors] say, why do you do this, you only make money if you sell the books, why don't weed out the negative reviews. And the reason is, because we are taking a different approach of trying to sell *all* books. We want to make every book available – the good, the bad and the ugly. And when you are doing that, you actually have an obligation […] to, sort of, let truth loose. And that's what we are trying to do with customer reviews. (Bezos 1998)

This position owes heavily to the techno-liberal belief that consumers are rational and the ontological marriage of product value and satisfactory functionality. The assumption that product value lies in the experience of consumers positions consumers as the window through which value must be gauged, and the assumption of consumer rationality positions consumers as having a privileged view through this window. Consumers are thought of as reliable observers of their own state of satisfaction:

> We let regular old customers review books. It turns out our customers are very smart, and their reviews are extremely helpful to other customers in terms of making purchasing decisions. (Bezos, 1998b)

The epistemological position of democratic experimentalism is also evident in how the aggregate star-rating on Amazon.com is calculated. Since 2015, Amazon.com has calculated the star-rating by employing an algorithm that weighs the individual ratings by factoring in criteria such as the number of consumers that have marked the individual ratings as helpful (Bishop, 2015). Consumers are here placed not only as judges of product value but also judges of the value of the value judgements of other consumers. Driving this move is again an ideological view of consumers as highly cognitively capable. Consumers are believed to be able to tell authentic reviews from untrustworthy ones:

> I'm also convinced that there is a little piece in the human brain that can immediately tell by reading somebody's else's writing whether the person is smart or crazy within the first five words. So you can actually weed out the reviews you don't want to pay attention to really well too. (Bezos, 1998b)

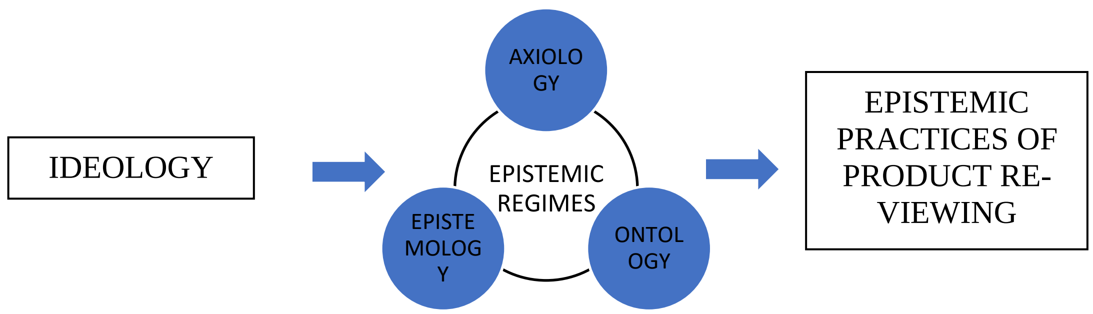
The epistemic authority of consumers draws its strength from the epistemological principles of 'authenticity' or 'relevance'. Democratic experimentalism concedes that consumers' experiences are not rigorous or produce reproducible outcomes. But they stem from real-life situations that resemble the situations of other consumers and are thus assumed to be 'authentic'. An Amazon patent for a computer system for soliciting user reviews articulates this assumption well:

> volunteer reviews can be procured much less expensively than professional reviews and *may have more appeal to readers that prefer reviews from those they perceive to more substantially share their perspective* (Keller et al., 2010)

4.8 Discussion

This article has followed Kozinets et al.'s (2010) suggestion to study the cultural shaping of product reviews by homing in on the role of ideology in processes of product reviewing. We show that ideology shapes product reviews through what we call 'epistemic regimes', systems of ideologically-rooted assumptions that orient and justify practices of producing knowledge about products. We identify three kinds of assumptions – axiological, ontological, and epistemological – which together form an epistemic regime. The three kinds of assumptions are interrelated. For example, the axiology of protecting consumer welfare implies an ontology that states that the 'real' value of a product lies in how its functionality compares to other products, because it is the ability to compare functionality that allows consumers to identify the product that maximizes consumer welfare. But this relationship is not one of one-way dependence; it goes both ways. The ontology of comparative functionality makes protecting consumer welfare a worthy goal because it portrays this goal as a matter of helping consumers see past the distorted and 'false' values of products. Had THINK subscribed to an ontology of satisfactory functionality and let the boundaries of products be defined by consumers' experience of the product to a greater extent, the goal of protecting consumer welfare – at least as it is rather narrowly and materialistically defined by THINK – would be more difficult to defend. Epistemic regimes thus produce validity by being *coherent* sets of interrelated assumptions which guide the production of product reviews and which convince market actors to buy into the claims advanced therein. We illustrate the relationships between ideology, epistemic regimes and practices of product

Figure 1 How ideologies shape product reviewing practices through epistemic regimes



reviewing below:

The finding that coherence between ontological assumptions, epistemological beliefs, and axiological purpose is key to establishing truth claims holds important implications for the extensive research literature debating the validity of product reviews, as we will show next.

4.8.1 The Validity of Online User Reviews

While the rise of online user reviews has been celebrated by many, it has also been debated how informative such reviews are. The debate has mainly revolved around how valid user reviews are as a measure of product value vis-à-vis other types of reviews, principally expert reviews. Some scholars argue that consumers trust user reviews more than they should, as this type of review tends to be more 'subjective' than expert reviews and therefore "lacks validity as a measure of objective quality" (de Langhe et al., 2016a, p. 826, see also 2016b). Others respond that consumers' trust in user reviews is warranted, arguing that they supplement rather than replace expert reviews (Winer & Fader, 2016) or simply outperform expert reviews as indicators of product quality (Simonson, 2016). Our findings support Kozinets' (2016, p. 837) claim that "[t]here is no universal standard on which to base designations of real, true, or actual quality—and concomitantly no way to assess the so-called biases that allegedly detract from it." For example, comparing the reviews of Amazon.com and THINK makes it clear that they are difficult to evaluate on equal terms, as they offer very different information. THINK aspires to generate information about the comparative functionality of products, where the reviews at Amazon.com are more oriented towards evaluating the likelihood of a product satisfying consumers' expectations about functionality. These are two very different measures of product value. The sources of satisfactory functionality, for instance, extend beyond the functional superiority of a product and also include aspects like price. In this perspective, discussing which type of product review is more 'valid' misses the point that each type bases its claim to validity in vastly different axiological, ontological, and epistemological assumptions. Put differently, the knowledge offered by both online user reviews and expert reviews is rooted in different epistemic regimes, which in different ways grant the reviews legitimacy as truthful representations of product value.

Turning attention from the validity of reviews to the ideologies and assumptions that justify different notions of validity mean that we can move on from the seemingly impossible task of defining a set of universal criteria that reviews must pass to be recognized as valid. This move has the potential to reinvigorate the discussion on what the rise of online user reviews has meant for consumers and society more generally. When we give up the notion that consumers can ever have 'perfect information' or something that resembles that (Simonson & Rosen, 2014), we are instead inclined to ask what kind of consequences different epistemic regimes have for how consumers choose and which companies are favored by the dominant epistemic regimes in the current information environment. For example, does the rise of user reviews – and the epistemic regimes that grant them legitimacy –

impact consumers' choices in ways different from expert reviews? What we are suggesting here is not simply measuring the sales impact of different types of reviews, as other research has done (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Simonsohn, 2011; Zhu & Zhang, 2010), but rather to be attentive to what kind of moral market orders different types of reviews and the ideologies they reproduce help give rise to.

Simonson (2016, p. 842) observes the growing influence of online user reviews with enthusiasm. His enthusiasm stems from the accessibility and low cost of user reviews but also from a skepticism towards expert-review organizations like THINK. He speculates that such an organization "may seek opportunities to enhance its perceived value by highlighting product differences even when the distinctions have limited significance for actual consumer experiences" (Simonson, 2016, p. 842). Our findings allow us to qualify this speculation. We did indeed find that expert-review organizations are oriented towards identifying product differences but we do not interpret this choice as mere opportunism. Rather, we see this tendency as a result of the epistemic regime that THINK subscribes to. THINK's test managers do not seek to uncover product differences just to recruit new paying members but also because they understand such information as central if consumers are to maximize their welfare. In other words, the choice to make products comparable should be understood against the axiology of protecting consumer welfare. This axiology also implies that the goal of THINK's reviews is not only to help consumers identify the functionally superior product but also to create a market that is organized around consumer welfare. So, even if the product differences that THINK constructs in the individual tests only have marginal significance for consumer experiences, the tests encourage companies to compete on the product attributes that THINK deem relevant for consumer welfare. This is important to consider, as past research has shown how the tests of THINK have the power to alter how companies design their products (M. Nøjgaard, 2022). While we agree with Simonson (2016) that the individual reviews may sometimes not have much significance for the individual consumer here and now, we argue that Simonson misses the point that the reviews drive a reorientation of market competition that sees companies work towards significantly improving their products over time.

Contrary to Simonson (2016), de Langhe et al. (2016a) are skeptical of online user reviews, arguing that expert reviews are more objective than the assessments of users. They therefore argue that we should be wary of celebrating the rise of online user reviews. But like Simonson (2016), de Langhe et al. are mainly concerned about the validity of reviews and are largely ignoring the impact of different definitions of validity on consumers and markets. Most crucially, in their celebration of the scientific rigor that the validity of THINK's reviews rest on, de Langhe et al. do not consider the costs of this rigor. Because THINK is committed to an epistemological position of technocratic experimentalism, it is constrained in making value claims without being able to support them with reproducible and rigorously crafted evidence. This for example means that THINK struggles to assess product dimensions that are difficult or costly to test in a rigorous way, even if these dimensions matter greatly for the welfare of consumers. Consider the case of product durability. As THINK test manager Grethe explains:

> We have an ongoing issue with durability for example. This parameter is super interesting when you are buying a washing machine […] but it's really, really difficult to test durability because it requires you to let the washing machine run in a way that looks like how it is used in households. And that requires you to, well, put clothes in and take clothes out and push some buttons and stuff like that. […] And that takes a long time […] It simply becomes too expensive and takes so long that *before we get the results, they have become a bit uninteresting, because the model is on its way out of the market again and something new is arriving*.

This is another example of the kinds of consequences that become apparent when we consider reviews from the perspective of epistemic regimes. Being attentive to the epistemic regimes underlying reviews allows us to see, for example, how epistemological commitments may constrain reviewers in assessing dimensions that they deem important or how axiological commitments may lead reviewers to align their reviews with goals that lie beyond the immediate benefitting of consumers.

4.8.2 Managerial Responses to Product Reviews

De Langhe et al.'s (2016b, p. 855) observation that "[o]ur understanding of the new information environment has major implications for how companies should allocate resources" underscores the managerial relevance of our study. Deepening our knowledge of the ideological underpinnings of expert reviews and online user reviews helps us better identify how managers should react to reviews and the information environment they form part of.

4.8.2.1 Implications for Product Development

In this article, we provide a way to systematically analyze how to adjust product design practices to different epistemic regimes. This is important because different dimensions and criteria are prioritized within different review systems depending on the epistemic regime that governs them. Tailoring one's products for getting favorable expert reviews does thus not necessarily mean that one will also be favorably reviewed by users.

In the past two decades, companies have increasingly sought to mine product reviews for information relevant to market intelligence, design leads, and consumer insight, often by using automated text analysis (Hou et al., 2019; Tirunillai & Tellis, 2014). We caution that this practice de-contextualizes the reviews, and likely leavers managers unaware that the reviews are shaped and framed by epistemic regimes rooted in particular ideologies. As we have shown, not just product ratings themselves but also product dimensions taken into account are reflective of ideological commitments, for example (lack of) concern for consumer safety, the environment, or usability for the disabled or the disadvantaged. Algorithmically aggregating and analyzing a large set of reviews will render such concerns and viewpoints invisible to analysts, and instead reproduce the main presuppositions of the ideology underlying the epistemic regime as facts – together with the epistemic effects of practical constraints that consumers face when reviewing. For example, consumers are simply not able to test the crash safety of a child car seat – but mining their product reviews will simply make it seem as if they care little about safety. Moreover, in light of our theory, mining user reviews amounts to a managerial implementation of what Fourcade and Healy (2007, p. 294) called "market populism" – justifying harmful corporate behavior as quasi-democratically sanction by 'consumers voting with their wallet.'

Identifying the axiological, ontological, and epistemological assumptions of the targeted review systems enables companies to figure out what product dimensions are most important to focus on and how to improve products within these dimensions to satisfy the criteria of the review system. To give a concrete example, our findings indicate that pursuing an innovation strategy of adding new functionalities within an existing product category may not be an effective strategy for attracting favorable expert reviews. As THINK seeks to make products comparable, the organization may choose to ignore new functionalities until they are widespread within the product category. Companies are thus not rewarded in the reviews for their investments into developing new functionality. This is for example evident in how THINK reviews electric toothbrushes. While some companies have begun adding 'smart' assistants to their toothbrushes, meant to guide consumers in how to brush their teeth, THINK has been putting off integrating this functionality into their test programs, as only some electric toothbrushes possess it (Susanne, THINK test manager).

If the target is attracting positive user reviews, developing new features and functionalities may be a sound product development strategy. Here, products are not compared in a standardized way, which means that, for example, adding a smart assistant to an electric toothbrush would likely generate positive reviews if adding the feature delivers on the promise of making it easier to clean one's teeth.

4.8.2.2 Implications for Challenging and Promotionally Leveraging Reviews

Our findings also bear implications for how to publicly respond to negative reviews or how to effectively leverage reviews as part of a promotional strategy. Being aware of the epistemic regimes underlying reviews enables companies to identify the assumptions on which different kinds of reviews rest. Once identified, these assumptions can be targeted and called into question, if companies receive reviews that they do not agree with. Our study suggests that reviews can be challenged on the grounds of axiology (i.e., are the reviews pursuing a 'worthy' goal?), ontology (i.e., are the reviews measuring the 'real' dimensions of products?), and epistemology (i.e., are the dimensions evaluated in an appropriate and legitimate manner?). For example, one may respond to a negative expert review by publicly emphasizing the epistemic authority of consumers vis-à-vis experts or by calling attention to how expert review organizations conceive of the value of products as comparative functionality and not the ability of the product to satisfy consumers' expectations. If reviews are used for promotional purposes, one would highlight the assumptions that give the reviews legitimacy and explain why this type of review is more trustworthy to other types of product information.

These insights are relevant for any company whose commercial success relies on product reviews. But the insights are particularly relevant for the companies and organizations that actually produce the reviews. The current consumer information environment abounds with different organizations that offer consumers information about the value of products – THINK and Amazon.com being just two organizations of many. The success and survival of some organizations, like THINK, depends entirely on their ability to convince consumers of the validity of the information they are offering. When this is the case, it becomes vital for organizations to effectively articulate the epistemic strengths of their reviews as well as the epistemic weaknesses of the reviews of their competitors.

4.9 Conclusion And Future Research

We have in this article argued that ideology influences product reviews through what we call epistemic regimes. While our findings allow us to appreciate the non-neutral nature of reviews and better identify the values they are promoting, there are still questions that need to be answered if we are to fully understand the ideological agendas and modus operandi of reviews.

Two areas of research call for particular attention. First, as also de Langhe et al. (2016b, p. 856) acknowledge, we need to know more about how consumers perceive and use reviews to understand how reviews ideologically shape markets. Even though the epistemic regimes that THINK and Amazon.com adhere to are often conflicting, such conflicts do not necessarily trouble consumers. It is for example likely that consumers accept the epistemic authority of both experts and users in making a purchasing decision, integrating the advice that they offer. We lack knowledge of how consumers navigate an information environment marked by a multiplicity of epistemic regimes.

Second, we need more knowledge about why different organizations subscribing to the same epistemic regimes differ in their review practices. We have in this article studied the ideological differences between online user reviews and expert reviews, in large part motivated by discrepancies between their ratings (Chen & Xie, 2008; Simonson, 2016). However, different providers of expert reviews, which supposedly largely follow the same epistemic regime, also often differ in their evaluations. This is for example sometimes the case with how Consumer Reports rate cars compared to other expert-review organizations (Jensen, 2012). How can we theoretically explain these differences and what role does ideology – or other cultural factors, such as communal norms (Kozinets et al., 2010) – play in producing them?

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5 The Value-Translation Model of Consumer Activism: How Consumer Watchdog Organizations Change Markets[5]

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Abstract. How do consumer watchdog organizations (CWOs) change markets? Research on consumer activism has prioritized studying grassroots movements of ordinary consumers over more formalized activist actors, resulting in a paucity of theoretical resources for understanding the activism of powerful consumer organizations such as CWOs. This article draws on the sociology of valuation and evaluation to develop a new theoretical model of consumer activism, the value-translation model, which departs from previous research in shifting the focus from activists' efforts to change *which* higher-order values govern markets to activists' efforts to change *how* they govern markets. Through a historical study of a Danish CWO associated with the comparative-testing movement, the article shows how CWOs 'translate' higher-order values into 'trials of value' (i.e., practical evaluation procedures that 'test' the strength of the connection between goods and higher-order values) and 'evaluation agents' (i.e., market actors capable of carrying out and acting on evaluations). Such translations structure how higher-order values influence markets and are therefore critical to manage for directing market change. The study extends our understanding of how objects are systemically valorized and re-valorized and how formalized forms of consumer activism can play an important role in such processes.

Keywords: value, consumer watchdog organizations, consumer activism, consumer movements, comparative testing

[5] This chapter presents Article 2. The article has been published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

5.1 Introduction

Consumer activism refers to organized efforts to promote consumer-benefitting change (Lang & Gabriel, 2015, pp. 170–192) and has attracted much attention within consumer research in recent years. So far, however, consumer researchers have prioritized studying the grassroots movements of ordinary consumers over professionalized and formally organized actors of consumer activism (Handelman & Fischer, 2018, p. 263), leaving us with few insights into how such powerful actors as "consumer associations, consumer interest groups, and consumer watchdogs" (Kjeldgaard et al., 2017, p. 67) advance the consumer interest. To begin to redress this gap, I set out to explore the role of consumer watchdog organizations (CWOs) in changing markets for the benefit of consumers.

CWOs institutionalize distrust of market actors (Rao, 1998) and work on behalf of consumers by carrying out two fundamental tasks: monitoring market actors' activities and alerting consumers and other relevant actors if these activities disfavor consumers (Brobeck, 2015, p. 28). The activism of CWOs merits attention because they "have played an important role in the establishment of major new consumer protections" (Brobeck & Mayer, 2015, p. 8) in many countries around the world (Hilton, 2009; Mayer, 2015). They have, for example, helped put seatbelts in cars, warning labels on cigarette packages, and keep toxic chemicals out of food (Silber, 1983). CWOs have, in short, "had important consequences for being a consumer in the market" (Hilton, 2009, p. 247). But how have CWOs brought about such consequences? How do CWOs change markets?

Reviewing the literature on consumer activism for theoretical resources to help us answer the questions above, I find that two theoretical models have dominated the study of how consumer activists change markets. The first, which I call the *sovereign-choice model*, is typically employed in studies of political consumerism (Holzer, 2006; Micheletti, 2003) and ethical consumption (Harrison et al., 2005; Shaw et al., 2006). Here, consumers carry out their activism through their individual consumption choices, using their day-to-day purchases to promote the values they think should guide how markets are organized. Consumers may for example boycott products to punish companies behaving in opposition to the values of consumers (Friedman, 1991, 1999; Garrett, 1987) or buycott products to reward companies that behave in harmony with these values (Friedman, 1996).

I call the other dominant model of consumer activism the *ideological-performance model*, which is often employed within the field of Consumer Culture Theory (Giesler, 2008; Gollnhofer et al., 2019; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Valor et al., 2020). This model directs attention to how consumer activists engage in "public and often creative performances" (Weijo et al., 2018, p. 251) of ideologies to change the shared values that govern how market actors valorize market entities (e.g., objects, actors, or activities) (Gollnhofer et al., 2019). Consumer activists can for example carry out dramatic performances of the ideology of social utilitarianism to make music consumers and label companies valorize practices of music distribution based on the extent to which the practices maximize the collective good (Giesler 2008).

How well do the two models described above capture the contribution of CWOs to market change? Both models explain change as a matter of asserting a set of "higher-order values" (Gollnhofer et al., 2019) – or shared understandings of value – to "reconstruct and reorient the market institution for alternative valorizations" (Kjeldgaard et al., 2017, p. 52). That is, whether emphasizing the power of consumers' consumption choices or their communicative action, the models theorize that consumers change markets by championing new values to serve as the dominant referents for assigning value to market entities. A focus on higher-order values does indeed seem fundamental to understanding the activism of CWOs. When CWOs evaluate market actors' activities, they draw on higher-order values to define which activities are acceptable and denounce the activities that do not live up to this definition. Following the conventional models of consumer activism, we may thus argue that CWOs change markets by extending the influence of higher-order values, so that they increasingly come to govern market valorizations.

However, if we look towards a field that has taken a deep interest in the question of valorization – the sociology of valuation and evaluation (SVE) (Krüger & Reinhart, 2017; Lamont, 2012) – it becomes clear that this view of watchdog activism also misses some of the fundamental facets of how CWOs intervene in valorization processes. SVE, and especially the branches of SVE that are influenced by ideas from Actor-Network Theory (Callon, 1998; Callon et al., 2002; Callon & Muniesa, 2005; Kjellberg & Mallard, 2013; Muniesa et al., 2007), invite us to consider how the activities at the heart of CWOs – evaluating market actors' activities and disseminating the resulting evaluations – 'translate' rather than merely extend higher-order values.

SVE stresses for example that to evaluate whether something is acceptable with reference to a set of values, one must translate the values into concrete criteria against which that thing can be judged (Lamont, 2012, p. 205). Even if market actors agree that a car, for example, should be judged according to the value of sustainability, they can only figure out which cars are most sustainable by defining a list of criteria that cars must meet to pass as sustainable (e.g., how often they must be serviced, their carbon emissions, or their wear and tear on roads, etc.) (Callon et al., 2002). How this list is put together has important consequences for how cars are valorized, since how the sustainability of a car is defined will influence which cars are found to be sustainable.

SVE similarly offers insights into what is at stake when evaluations are disseminated, directing our attention to the act of formatting evaluations (Callon & Muniesa, 2005). Suppose an actor has evaluated a car against a list of criteria and wants to inform other actors of its evaluation. In this case, the evaluation must be passed onto the targeted actor and translated into a format that this actor can understand. If consumers, for example, were presented with the unedited lab report from a carbon emissions test, they would likely be overwhelmed by its informational complexity and struggle to mobilize the evaluation for choosing between cars. But if the results from the carbon emissions test takes the form of a simple emission rating in a sales brochure, the evaluation becomes a useful instrument. When evaluations travel through markets, they regularly transform into new formats and their formatting structures the actions that they invite and lend themselves to.

These insights from SVE suggest that the dominant models that have thus far been employed to study consumer activism do not equip us to fully explain the longstanding and ongoing influences of CWOs on markets. In this article, I will develop a theoretical model to explain the activist potential of CWOs, elaborating on the ideas from SVE already presented above. I call this the *value-translation model* of consumer activism.

To illustrate how the model helps us explain the activism of CWOs, I focus on the comparative-testing movement – which has given rise to some of today's most powerful CWOs, including *Consumer Reports* in the US and *Which?* in the UK – and trace how a Danish CWO embodying this movement has changed Danish consumer markets since 1964.

5.2 The Value-Translation Model of Consumer Activism

5.2.1 Translating Higher-Order Values

The value-translation model points to three valorization processes that help explain how consumer activists restructure markets for alternative valorizations. The first process refers to the negotiation of 'which values matter', which has been the focal process of valorization in the two models dominating the study of consumer activism. The value-translation model complements this focus on higher-order values by emphasizing the processes of negotiating 'how the values that matter are accounted for' and 'how market actors are equipped to act on the values that matter'. In short, the model suggests that the way values structure market change depends on how they are 'translated' into evaluation procedures and actionable evaluations.

The notion of translation I am drawing on here stems from Actor-Network Theory (Callon, 1984) and refers to "the basic social process through which something – an idea, a rule, a text, a product, a technology, a claim – spreads across time and space (Latour, 1986)" (Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2007, p. 144). In marketing studies, translation has been shown to be a central process of market formation (Giesler, 2012; Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2007). I use the concept to explain how consumer activists make higher-order values spread throughout markets.

The key idea behind the notion of translation is that 'transportation' is often accompanied by 'transformation'. As Kjellberg and Helgesson (2007, p. 144) write, an entity can only spread if someone picks it up, and "[t]hose who do pick it up make an essential contribution to its existence and survival", meaning that "transportations regularly transform that which is being moved". Thus, translating higher-order values does not imply a 'literal' translation where market actors faithfully extend the influence of the higher-order values they are drawing on to evaluate something. Rather, when actors translate higher-order values into evaluation procedures and actionable evaluations, they transform the higher-order values.

5.2.2 Translation as Organizing Trials of Value

The importance of translating values into evaluation procedures is particularly pronounced in the work of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006). They emphasize that to establish the 'worth' of an object, it must undergo a 'test of worth'. Krüger and Reinhart (2017, p. 273) succinctly summarize this argument: "For valorization to work, the test has to establish a stable connection between the object and an order of worth". It is the test that translates higher-order values – or orders of worth – into evaluations that allow actors to categorize entities as either conforming to or violating higher-order values.

What kinds of transformations are involved in this translation process? This is a question which takes center stage in Callon et al.'s (2002) notion of 'qualification'. They argue that the qualities of goods "are not properties which already exist and on which information simply has to be produced so that everyone can be aware of them". To Callon et al. (2002, p. 198), product qualities "are not observed; they are 'revealed' through tests or trials". This view implies that the act of evaluating (i.e., assessing the value of products) is always also an act of valorizing (i.e., assigning values to products). Evaluating a product assigns a value or a set of values to the product which did not 'exist' before the evaluation.

The dual nature of evaluation (i.e., assessing and assigning value) means that goods do not have a single, objective existence. It will always be possible to contest the established ways of accounting for their value. As Callon (2002, p. 199) notes, "[n]ot only may the list of characteristics be controversial (which characteristics ought to be taken into consideration?) but so also, above all, is the value to be given to each of them". This open-endedness of trials of value makes them a target for actors wanting to change how market valorizations are performed. It is easy to imagine how a manufacturer, for example, might promote a trial that attributes favorable characteristics to his product over one that 'reveals' its flaws. Trials thus always valorize entities in highly particular ways. The way trials are organized has consequences for how higher-order values impact evaluations, which is why trials of value cannot be thought of as merely 'extending' higher-order values.

When presented this way, the relevance of trials of value to consumer activism is clear. Trials of value are political, as they always benefit some actors more than others. Think again of the manufacturer who benefits from a trial that defines his products as favorable. This perspective raises the challenge for consumer activists of cultivating trials of value that test the link between higher-order values and the market entities they are targeting for change (e.g., people, products, or practices) in a way that favors the consumers they seek to serve. This view of activism may be particularly relevant to explaining how CWOs change markets, as it attunes us to the power of the monitoring activities of CWOs. When CWOs monitor market actors, they do not merely produce information about them but rather organize trials that regulate their very constitution (e.g., as violators of the higher-order values the CWOs are trying to promote).

5.2.3 Translation as Rendering Evaluations Actionable

A second set of transformations results from translating trials of value into actionable evaluations. As Callon and Muniesa (2005, p. 1231) argue, for a trial of value to eventually result in an evaluation that can be acted on, "a result has to be extracted". That is, for an actionable evaluation to emerge, it is not enough to perform a trial of value; the findings that result from this trial must be 'summed up' and represented in such a way that they can be read and understood by the actors for whom they are supposed to have relevance. For Callon and Muniesa (2005), however, extracting a result from a trial of value does not merely communicate value but partakes in its construction. For example, a lab report and a sales brochure may draw on the same trial of value – e.g., a carbon emissions test – to assign value to cars but typically still end up constructing that value in different ways. Many of the technical complexities of the lab report may be concealed in the sales brochure to enhance the accessibility of the test results and perhaps to strategically highlight certain aspects of the test. In this view, the content and material form of evaluations cannot be separated.

This argument is more than a philosophical point about the ontology of product value; it bears practical implications for how evaluations make actors act. The way the formatting of evaluations constructs value is intimately tied to the actionability of the evaluations, as different formats afford and invite particular lines of action. A sales brochure may for example encourage consumers to rush down to the car dealer to buy a car, whereas a lab report may leave them confused and unable to make up their mind and take a decision. It is this observation that makes SVE scholars argue that the agency of market actors is distributed across both humans (e.g., consumers) and the formatted 'devices' that equip them to evaluate (Muniesa et al., 2007) (e.g., a lab report or a sales brochure). Consider Callon and Muniesa's (2005, p. 1238) account of how consumers acquire the capability to choose among the products they find in grocery stores:

> the consumer is never alone or isolated: he or she is distributed and makes assessments that involve references, brands and all sorts of preformatted and precalculated information supplied by the supermarket and its arrangements. Packaging, shelves, proximity between products, brands, labels and promotions — all of these constitute a system of distributed cognition.

Market actors and their evaluation devices form 'evaluation agents', distributed agents equipped to perform particular evaluations and employ these evaluations to carry out particular programs of action.

This view also implies that evaluation agents never simply 'extend' higher-order values through their actions but rather manifest one 'version' of values, among many possible versions (Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2006). Compare for example two differently formatted devices for evaluating the healthiness of foods – nutrition labels and nutrition mobile apps – and how they differ in structuring the influence of the higher-order value of healthiness on food markets. Both nutrition labels and nutrition apps allow consumers to easily identify 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' products but the apps often also equip consumers with additional evaluative capacities. With the nutrition app Yuka, for example, consumers can scan products to access a rating of their healthiness and "for each scanned product categorized as 'bad' or 'mediocre,' the app recommends equivalent products that rank higher in the same category" (Soutjis, 2020, p. 119). The app pushes consumers to buy a healthier alternative instead of buying nothing at all, whereas the label does not offer a cognitive and actionable template for how to react to negative healthiness ratings. The label and the app give rise to two different evaluation agents who are configured to act on the higher-order value of healthiness in different ways.

This perspective positions the formatting of evaluations as a key concern for consumer activists looking to institutionalize alternative market valorizations. The success of consumer activism often hinges on whether other actors take up the evaluations of consumer activists. When this is the case, consumer activists must create evaluation devices that are able to circulate and afford actions in the direction of the change the activists seek. Translating evaluations into action may be particularly important for activist actors such as CWOs because much of their work revolves around distributing information about the activities of market actors. They, in other words, not only produce evaluations but also pass them on to other actors. Seen from the perspective of the value-translation model, the informational enterprise of CWOs should not merely be understood as transmitting information but rather as cultivating evaluation agents.

In summary, higher-order values are translated through two processes: First, they are translated into evaluation procedures through the organization of trials of value and are then translated into actionable evaluations and, if the translation is successful, action through the formatting of evaluation devices and evaluation agents. These translation processes merit attention because they do not merely 'extend' but rather 'transform' the influence of values on the organization of markets.

5.3 Context and Methodology

5.3.1 The Comparative-Testing Movement

I will illustrate the value of the value-translation model of consumer activism by studying how a Danish comparative-testing movement has intervened in market valorization processes. But what is a comparative-testing organization and what makes such organizations a good case for studying consumer watchdog activism? Comparative-testing organizations rate products and rank them against each other based on their performance in quasi-scientific tests and publish their product ratings for consumers. Comparative-testing organizations qualify as CWOs because they monitor market actors and warn against those that act against the consumer interest (e.g., producing poorly functioning or even harmful products). Although they are often conceived as mere "advice bureaus to help shoppers obtain better value for money" (Hilton, 2009, p. 81), comparative-testing organizations have historically been among the most influential actors of formally organized consumer activism. As Hilton (2009, p. 10) observes, "[s]ince the mid-twentieth century, the history of consumer activism has been intimately tied in with the growth of the comparative testing movement". Lang and Gabriel (2015, p. 177) agree and add that this movement "is today by far the highest profile form of consumer activism, to such an extent that it is often wrongly regarded as being the entire consumer movement".

The first comparative-testing organizations were founded in the US in the 1920s and 1930s and, according to Rao (1998, pp. 924–929), rose to prominence because their tests allowed consumers to navigate the increasing technological complexity of consumer goods and provided a corrective to the growing tendency of advertising to appraise products by appealing to emotion and style rather than logic and substance. Led by the US organization *Consumers Union*, the comparative-testing movement grew into a force for change in the US (Silber, 1983) and came to serve as "the model for organized consumerism as it took off in Europe after World War II" (Hilton, 2009, p. 10), giving rise to the likes of *Which?* in the UK and *Stiftung Warentest* in Germany. From the 1970s, comparative-testing organizations also began to crop up in the developing world, making the movement a truly global phenomenon (Hilton, 2009, pp. 10–11).

In Denmark, the origins of the comparative-testing movement can be traced back to 1947, when a group of unhappy housewives marched to the Danish government building to demand that the post-war rationing and import restrictions be carried out in a way that would better accommodate the daily needs of the Danish housewife (Forbrugerrådet, 1987). Those housewives would go on to found what is today known as the *Danish Consumer Council* (henceforth: the Council)[6], which has grown into a highly professionalized and formalized organization with a secretariat of about 100 staff centrally running the organization, identified today as "the indisputable lead organization of Danish consumers" (Ronit, 2015, p. 163). In 1964, the Council began publishing a consumer magazine entitled THINK, which was devoted to publishing comparative tests, and comparative testing remains one of the Council's central activities today.

While in its first years THINK independently designed and conducted comparative tests, it soon began collaborating with other comparative-testing organizations as a way to reduce the costs of testing and increase the number of tests it could afford. Today, THINK is a member of *International Consumer Research and Testing*, which is a consortium of 37 organizations, including *Consumer Reports* (formerly *Consumers Union*), that jointly designs and conducts tests. The tests of THINK and the impact they have on markets must thus be understood as the collective achievement of this group of comparative-testing organizations.

5.3.2 Historical Analysis of a Danish CWO

The analysis of this article mainly draws on an archival study of the consumer magazine THINK. The motivation for analyzing the pages of THINK was to understand how comparative-testing organizations negotiate the value of products through their tests and how such negotiations impact markets. The archival analysis allowed me to study how the "politics of value" (Appadurai, 1986, p. 3) inscribed in the tests of THINK had changed and how these changes had structured the market effects of the tests.

[6] Today, both the organization behind the magazine and the magazine itself are formally called the *Danish Consumer Council THINK*. To distinguish the two entities, I refer to the organization as the Council and the magazine as THINK. It is important to note here that even though the magazine is published by the Council, the editorial office of THINK has maintained autonomy in setting its own agenda.

The Council granted me access to a full collection of the magazine in printed format. I browsed through every page of every issue of the magazine since the first one in 1964 and, using a mobile app to scan, recorded the pages I deemed relevant to understanding the role of comparative testing in shaping markets. I recorded every test, across all product types, to trace how the tests changed, both in terms of how they were crafted and how they were presented. I recorded every editorial to get a sense of the general concerns that underlay changes in testing practices. I recorded articles commenting on tests (e.g., THINK featuring the criticism of manufacturers or THINK commenting on the accomplishments of their tests). Finally, I recorded featured comments from consumers who subscribed to THINK, to study how the tests were received and used. I ended up with a total of 7611 scanned pages for further analysis.

I then proceeded to analyze the archival material as textual artefacts, performing thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) to identify patterns in how the tests of THINK have been conducted and presented and in how they have had an impact (or failed to have an impact) on markets. To provide a more fine-grained exploration and exposition of the shifting value politics of THINK, I also selected one product type for more extensive analysis: child car seats. Changing the market for child seats has been a priority for THINK since the magazine's early years, and it has consistently tested this product type (in 1970, 1978, 1993 and at least once annually since 2001). The frequency of these tests facilitated the adoption of a comparative analytical approach (Spiggle, 1994), allowing me to more effectively compare modes of conducting and presenting tests during different time periods.

To check the validity of my interpretations of the archival data, I also conducted oral histories (Janesick, 2014) with two long-term employees at THINK. Both interviewees have been involved in conducting comparative tests and both have about 30 years of work experience in THINK and were therefore able to provide first-hand accounts of many of the critical developments I had identified by studying the magazine.

Throughout the study, I have followed the precepts of qualitative historical research and sought to critically evaluate my sources of evidence (Golder, 2000; Witkowski & Jones, 2006), considering whether my witnesses to the history of THINK were competent, objective and reliable and whether other sources corroborated their accounts (Gottschalk, 1969). These criteria led me to collect data not emanating from THINK-based witnesses (the magazine and oral histories) with a view to analyzing the market effects of THINK, as these witnesses could have an interest in amplifying its achievements.

I collected data pertaining to the effects on both consumers and manufacturers. As in the archival data, I focused on the case of child car seats and, due to concerns of data availability, narrowed the analytical focus even more to a relatively recent change in how THINK tests car seats: the decision in 2011 to begin testing seats for problematic chemicals. To trace the effects of the tests on consumers, I interviewed five employees from Danish baby product retailers (four store managers and one commercial director for a chain of stores), all chosen for their lengthy experience within the industry and their frequent discussions with consumers about their car seat-related concerns. Their experience and close contact with consumers enabled them to speak competently about whether consumers use the tests when shopping for child car seats and how their usage has changed. To analyze how the comparative tests have influenced manufacturers, I looked at the press releases of three major child car seat manufacturers (Maxi-Cosi, Cybex, and Britax-Römer). I analyzed the press releases from 2001 – 10 years before THINK introduced chemical testing to their evaluations of child car seats – until today. I was attentive to changes in how the manufacturers design seats and how they present themselves to consumers, and, based on the timing and content of these changes, considered whether they could be traced back to the tests of THINK.

I will now present the findings that emerged from the historical analysis of THINK's testing practices and their relationship to the market.

5.4 Championing Functionality as the Dominant Higher-Order Value

Since its inception, THINK has been driven towards questioning dominant principles of product value in the marketplace. In its early years, THINK frequently railed against advertisers who sought to advance evaluations of products that were based on "status symbols and snobbish values" (1968(6), 2). THINK not only saw this tendency of advertising as unhelpful for consumers but, more worryingly, believed it was making consumers stupid, as THINK's first editor remarked:

> I know that ad men assume that consumers are idiots. But I find that to be neither polite nor true. What is true is that they try to turn people into idiots, and the ad has certainly put a large apparatus in motion in the hope of coming closer to this goal. (1964(4), 16)

THINK saw it as a prime task to advance a higher-order value that would lead to a more fulfilling life for consumers:

> If a consumer wishes to drive himself to the poor house in an oversized and chrome-plated status symbol of a car, he shall not hear one critical word from us. Nor are we offended by the consumer who feels his confidence grow with the amount of pomade in his hair. But it is not our job to tell consumers how they can let themselves be brought into uniformity and replace a free and independent life with hollow values. We are here to orient consumers towards the real values in goods (1968(6), 2)

What were these "real" values? What values did THINK deem appropriate for product evaluations? A mere glance at its tests provides an answer. When THINK tested electrical toothbrushes, they rated their cleaning efficiency (1964(2), 3); when they tested bathroom scales, they rated their measurement accuracy (1964(3), 28); and when they tested school bags, they rated their durability (1964(5), 28). THINK referred to the higher-order value of 'functionality' in their product evaluations, linking the value of products to their functional utility instead of their emotional or identity-related benefits.

5.5 New Trials for Accounting for Functionality

While asserting the higher-order value of functionality has been central to the work of THINK towards improving markets to the benefit of consumers, many of its efforts have been directed at defining how functionality is accounted for. It has, in other words, sought to change the trials of value that establish a link between products and the value of functionality. THINK has intervened in such trials of value in two ways. It has redefined both the criteria of functionality and the procedures by which criteria are employed for evaluations.

5.5.1 Defining the Criteria of Higher-Order Values

THINK's attempts to define the criteria of functionality are particularly important in understanding how it intervened in the valorization of products in markets where the higher-order value of functionality was already a dominant referent of value. THINK observed that even when manufacturers were trying to sell their products with reference to their functional utility, their idea of functionality did not always fit the needs that THINK perceived consumers as having in their lives. This was for example the case with child car seats, which THINK began testing in 1970. The first test was motivated by the observation that child seats were "often constructed to keep the child calm, so it does not bother or disturb the driver, rather than to secure the child against harm in the case of an accident" (1970(4), 12). Keeping the child calm rather than keeping it safe had thus been the definition of functionality guiding the design of seats, which, in the eyes of THINK, had resulted in a market where none of the seats available were "100% suited as child seats" (1970(4), 12). THINK reacted to these design tendencies by testing 12 child seat models based on how much force they could withstand, intending to evidence a link between how the models were designed and how well they protected children against harm in collisions. The test confirmed this link and even found some models to be "death-traps" (1970(4), 10). To THINK, this meant that child safety should be a core function according to which different models of child seats were attributed value, thus proposing a new definition of the functionality of child seats.

THINK has throughout its history sought to update the definition of functionality so that it is aligned with the functions that consumers, in THINK's view, need their products to fulfil to lead good lives. This mission has regularly seen THINK redefine the criteria of functionality. Whereas THINK had tied the functionality of child seats to their safety performance in collisions in the 1970s, it noted the rising importance of another feature for the functionality of car seats in the 2010s: the chemicals they contain. Since the early 2000s, THINK had been vocal about their concern about the increased use of phthalates and other potentially harmful chemicals in the production of myriad consumer goods such as "floors, walls, cars, toys, gloves, cords, waterproofs, rubber boots…" (2001(11), 3). This concern led THINK to implement a chemical test in many of the test programs it was already running, including its program for testing child car seats. While the unwanted chemicals in child seats were not illegal or immediately harmful to children, THINK saw chemical content as a crucial criterion for judging their value, as the chemicals in child seats would aggravate the total chemical exposure of children:

> The car seats come into close contact with small children, who are more vulnerable, and it is a recognized problem that every source of daily chemical exposure counts due to the so-called cocktail-effect from all the harmful substances we are exposed to in our everyday lives. (2011(118), 31-32)

THINK thus sought to change how the functional utility of car seats is accounted for, asserting both chemical safety and collision safety as core criteria for evaluating child seat functionality. This redefinition of functionality has had profound effects on the market for child seats, as it has changed how both consumers and manufacturers evaluate the value of a seat.

Interviews with managers of children's stores, who spend much of their working time listening to the concerns of consumers, reveal the impact of the redefinition on consumers. Birthe, a store manager with more than 30 years of experience selling car seats, explains that consumers often raise the concern of chemical safety ever since THINK introduced this criterion and refer directly to its tests when articulating their concern:

> Interviewer: You mentioned chemical content, is that something that, in your experience, matters to consumers?
>
> Birthe: Very much so, very much so. Just the fact that [the seat] reacts [in the chemical test]. Just the fact that it can be measured, even if it is far below the [legally] accepted levels, [consumers] may question [the seat].

Store manager Annie affirms the importance that the criterion of chemical safety has gained for consumers, sharing a story of how bad chemical ratings can hamper the sales of a seat:

> It can have a massive influence on the sales of a car seat. About a year ago I had a talk with a supplier who had a seat, where, if you looked at all the safety parameters, then the chair did really well. And they had sold a crazy amount of this seat. But then this [test on] unwanted chemicals came out […] then the sales stopped entirely.

The store managers interviewed furthermore agree that the criterion of chemical safety has become increasingly important for consumers, with Birthe commenting, "I would say that the last 10 years, [consumers] have become more and more aware of it", which corresponds to when THINK introduced the criterion in their test.

The effects on manufacturers are also evident. From when THINK introduced the criterion in 2011, its tests have documented a steady improvement in the amount of potentially problematic chemicals found in child car seats. This indicates that including chemical safety in the definition of functionality has shaped how car seat manufacturers design their seats, encouraging them to reduce their reliance on problematic chemicals. As a case in point, Maxi-Cosi announced in 2012 that they would prohibit the use of specific “potentially toxic” substances following “heightened media coverage, associated with the use of flame retardants in juvenile products, [which] has introduced concerns and confusion to both our customers and the general public” (Dorel Juvenile Group, 2012).

5.5.2 Protesting the Procedures of Trials of Value

THINK has reconfigured the trials of functionality not only by defining the criteria for what makes a product functionally useful, but also by defining the procedures by which products are to be judged against these criteria. THINK stressed that rigorously testing products in laboratories and comparing their performance under controlled circumstances was the most appropriate way of gauging the value of a product. Comparative testing was, in the view of THINK, the procedure that would best serve consumers.

We can better appreciate the activist character of this championing of comparative testing as the dominant procedure to valorize products if we look at the trials of value THINK has opposed. Around the time THINK was founded, there was little regulation to constrain the ability of suppliers to portray the benefits of their products. A separate law governing good marketing practice and a government body to enforce this law, for example, did not see the light of day in Denmark until 1974 (1974(10), 2; 1975(4), 2). As a consequence, companies had relative freedom in assigning value to products. Through advertising, they were able to forge a strong connection between their products and prevalent higher-order values, such as when a market-leading juice producer, Ribena, had “sought to establish the perception that Ribena is a “health drink”” (1964(1), 22) through a series of national advertisements.

THINK was in part born out of a frustration with the valorization regime of advertising. It regularly called attention to the fact that the ad was an ally of suppliers and thus reflected the view suppliers had of their own products (1974(6), 2). THINK thought that the alliance between the ad and suppliers meant that “[t]he ad inherently deals in exaggeration and secrecy” (1965(6), 2) and noted that this view was even embraced by advertisers themselves, referencing a prominent Danish ad man who had “defended the great exaggeration [of the ad] by saying that people subtract half of what it claims anyway” (1972(5), 2). For THINK, the ad served the interests of consumers poorly, as the valorization of advertising was foremost carried out with an intent to sell: the values attributed by advertising were not intended to help consumers buy the best products but rather to help products get sold.

At the same time, THINK protested that advertising largely concealed how the values advertisers attributed to products were justified. How had Ribena, the aforementioned juice manufacturer, for example reached the conclusion that their drink was healthy? On what grounds was this claim justified? As THINK asked skeptically in the title of the article featuring its juice test, “What is *behind* the claims of the advertisement?” (1964(1), 22, emphasis added).

THINK offered comparative testing as an alternative procedure for assigning value to goods. In contrast to advertising, comparative testing made product claims accountable to product performance. The strength of the link between a product and a higher-order value was to be assessed through subjecting products to rigorous tests. THINK deemed this trial of value superior to those employed in advertising because it made explicit the foundations of value claims: only by ‘proving themselves’ in the laboratory would products be able to acquire a set of values. Comparative testing sought to render the valorization of consumer goods transparent and accountable, thus breaking with the opacity of how advertisers justified their value claims. In the words of THINK, “[t]he task of THINK is to make consumers think, *to replace secrecy with clear information*” (1965(6), 2, emphasis added).

But THINK thought that comparative testing benefitted consumers beyond merely making the process of valorization more transparent. For THINK, the activist potential of the comparative test consisted in more than uncovering the ‘true’ values of products. THINK was especially in its early years quick to dismiss the idea that the "truth exists as something absolute […] [that] should be respected by friends and foes" (1966(6), 2). In an editorial provocatively entitled "The truth is subjective", the editor explained that the truth of products cannot be absolute because the truth is always tied to the interests of the beholder:

> *[The manufacturer and consumers] are not in the same boat*. The manufacturer is responsible for his business. His efforts are to be measured based on the profits. The consumer must […] care for his family. […] The ad […] seeks to convince every consumer that every good is very cheap and very excellent. […] Does it speak the truth? There will be two opinions on that depending on whether you are the manufacturer's or the consumer's advocate (1966(6), 2, emphasis in original)

What the editor suggested was that how a 'good' product was to be defined would always depend on an assessment of what products should be 'good for'. The bottom line? Or the wellbeing of consumers? Therefore, comparative testing was not to be understood as an 'objective' endeavor, and THINK frequently fended off demands from industry actors that its tests should meet the criteria of universal objectivity. Designing a test that would meet both manufacturers' and consumers' criteria for objectivity would often be practically impossible, as the editor of THINK further noted:

> It is very easy to imagine that the properties of the product that the consumer is interested in getting tested do not at all suit the manufacturer. A consumer magazine may naturally send out tasks to laboratories and experts, but we cannot put up requirements for our tests so the counterpart will declare themselves satisfied and recognize them as "objective". I wonder if it is of any use at all to expect "objectivity" from others? Maybe we should settle for making that requirement for ourselves? (1965(4), 2)

5.5.3 Trials of Value as Politics of Value

So, if comparative testing did not uncover the ultimate truth of products but the truth that THINK felt benefitted consumers, what did this truth look like?[7] Exploring some of the critiques that have been directed at THINK's testing methods reveals how comparative testing assigns value to products in a way that favors consumers over other parties.

Since the creation of THINK, suppliers have taken issue with how it constructs its test samples. Central to the sampling method of THINK has always been that its test workers buy the test items without revealing their identity. An early critique against this approach from industry actors was that it was "non-factual, misleading, subjective, and crude" (1965(4), 2) as THINK risked being misinformed in the store or buying a test item that was not representative of the general quality of the product. THINK believed, on the contrary, that this was a strength and not a flaw of its sampling method: "What interests us is not for THINK to receive nice treatment and correct information – we are far more interested in knowing how the ordinary consumer is treated" (1965(4), 2).

Another frequent critique of how THINK sampled products was that its approach did not provide solid statistical foundations for its claims (1970(7), 2; 1970(7), 39; 2008(89), 2; 2008(89), 26). As a manufacturer of tinned food had complained in a national newspaper following a test that had rated his products poorly:

> The foundation. Well, what is the foundation? Maybe we should ask how many cans of each product are taken into consideration? We have a pronounced feeling that it is a matter of *one single can of each product*. […] That a few errors occur during mass production is unfortunately unavoidable. […] But the

[7] For a more thorough treatment of how the 'value politics' of comparative testing favors consumers, see Mallard (2007). Here, I settle for a few examples that clearly illustrate the non-absolute nature of the values comparative testing 'reveals'.

> industry considers it inadmissible that an official consumer organization uses this fact for a generalized characterization of the products of the industry (1970(7), 39, emphasis in original)

Again, THINK found this to be a strength. As it argued, "[the manufacturer] misses the fact that consumers are rarely able to buy 1000 cans and we allow ourselves to be brazen enough to put ourselves in the consumer's place" (1970(7), 2).

A final line of critique illustrating the beneficial character of comparative testing for the consumer relates to how THINK weights the criteria involved in its tests. This critique has for example been prevalent in the case of child car seats. The store managers expressed frustration over the weight THINK assigns to the 'usability' of car seats, which accounts for 50% of the rating:

> Well, THINK for example, they represent consumers, so they are very, very concerned with what is easy and convenient for the parents in terms of installing the seats. Whereas that is not something we are concerned with, we are concerned with the safety of the seat for the baby. (Birgitte)

The reason THINK assigns such importance to the ease of installation is that "a seat incorrectly installed gives a false sense of security, because it is less safe" (2005(55), 8). For THINK, usability is thus also a safety criterion. The store managers disagreed with this way of factoring usability into the safety of car seats:

> Of course, it has some relevance for safety, but all seats are easy to install when you have received instructions. Then consumers can correctly install what they have bought. But if consumers for example think, well, "I'm going to buy THINK's test-winning seat and I'm going to buy it online", it's in those situations where we typically see seats end up being installed incorrectly, because they haven't received proper instructions. (Birgitte)

When Birgitte and the other store managers interviewed argue that usability is an irrelevant safety criterion, they have only *their own* customers in mind: the ease of use of seats matters little to these consumers because they have been instructed in store how to use them. THINK addresses its tests to a broader group of consumers, including those who do not physically visit children's stores to buy their car seats and receive guidance from trained staff. This way of weighting the usability criterion brings out some important particularities of how THINK seeks to valorize products in a way that in their view benefits consumers the most. THINK tends to follow "principles of precaution" (2005(59), 3) when designing its trials of value, organizing them around the worst-case scenario – in this case, that consumers have not been properly instructed how to install car seats.

5.5.4 Institutionalizing Trials of Value

To take stock of THINK's success in promoting comparative testing as the ultimate trial for judging product value, we must consider how THINK has influenced product standards. In short, standards specify acceptable product performance and methods for testing such performance. Standards are developed through the collaboration of multiple market actors – technical experts from companies, consumer organizations, academic institutions, etc. – and therefore tend to represent consensual procedures for establishing product value. While compliance is only mandatory for some standards, shaping standards is a powerful valorization intervention as it entails moving the consensus around appropriate ways of accounting for value. If actors succeed in institutionalizing their preferred trials of value into standards, they can govern valorizations 'at a distance', with less involvement and fewer investments (Ponte & Gibbon, 2005).

When THINK was founded, there were no standards for many product types, a fact that THINK often lamented (1982(1), 14; 1983(6), 9). THINK strongly supported the development of standards and actively sought to bring them in line with its own trials of value. For example, after its test of child car seats in 1970, which revealed that many seats were suffering from serious safety issues, THINK urged the need for a safety standard and sent a proposal for such a standard to the Danish Standardization Council, the organization responsible for developing standards in Denmark. THINK also actively defended this proposal against criticism, for example when an interest organization representing Danish car owners objected that its method only tested the robustness of the car seats and not how well the seats kept children safe (1978(6), 22). After another test in 1978 revealed that dangerous car seats were still being sold, THINK again stressed the urgency of developing a standard (1978(5), 14), and as a result of these efforts, a Danish standard for child car seats was finally created in 1982 (Forbrugerrådet, 1982, p. 11).

As an increasing number of standards have seen the light of day, THINK has worked towards ensuring that the standards keep improving for the benefit of consumers. In the early 2000s, for example, it focused on the EU standard for child car seats as a target for reform. Statistical reports of traffic accidents had documented that side collisions were the second most frequent type of accident and had cost 20 children their lives in the period between 2000 and 2007 in Denmark (2008(85), 7; 2009(95), 13). And yet side-collision tests were not part of the standard, which only specified acceptable safety performance in frontal collision scenarios. THINK therefore argued that the standard did not reflect the traffic risks consumers were exposed to in their real lives and that, as a result, the standard was not suited for assessing the value of child seats, much less for ensuring manufacturers would produce seats that kept children safe. THINK therefore integrated side collisions into its own test program, even though it usually followed the test programs set out in the current standards when designing its comparative tests. THINK's tests revealed that many models did indeed exhibit safety issues in side collisions (2008(85), 7) and thereby demonstrated the urgency of changing the procedure for valorizing child seats to include such accidents. Its efforts again proved effective as a new standard, which included side collisions, was introduced in 2013 (2013(142), 35).

To summarize, the continuous work of THINK to usher in new trials of value are central to its contribution to market change. By defining the criteria of the higher-order value of functionality and the procedures by which these criteria are employed for judging the functional utility of products, THINK has intervened in how products are valorized, often with considerable success. As the examples above show, turning higher-order values into trials of value amounts to more than extending the influence of the higher-order values in question. Organizing trials of value involves a *particular way* of making values matter. For example, the way THINK defined the criteria and procedures for accounting for functionality represents a particularized translation of the value of functionality. Its activism partly lies in how it has sought to make the particularities of its trials of value work for consumers.

5.6 Equipping Consumers to Evaluate Functional Utility

5.6.1 Enhancing Consumers' Evaluation Agency

Since its origins, THINK has been concerned with disseminating the findings of its comparative tests in a format that would help consumers make informed choices about which products to buy. Early on, THINK observed that suppliers did little to provide consumers with the information necessary to compare products and gauge the functional utility they were likely to get from them. Many products were not required to feature basic product information on the packaging, such as the date of production (1964(4), 11) or the contents and net weight (1964(2), 2; 2000(9), 3). Consumers therefore often had to rely on the information suppliers chose to provide, which was problematic in the eyes of THINK as they saw consumers and suppliers as having opposing interests. For THINK, this situation amounted to setting the fox to mind the geese (1964(5), 2), as it left consumers vulnerable to deceitful advertising:

> Today the consumer is the weak party compared to other groups. He who buys a good is an amateur compared to the seller. The manufacturer is at the same time the only one who knows what his good consists of, what it can be used for, and what service he is ready to provide. (1978(2), 4)

THINK argued that the weak position of consumers resulted from an imbalance of resources between consumers and suppliers for producing and propagating information. As it noted, "consumers have approximately a mere total of 1 million kroner at their disposal for informational activities; the ad, on the other hand, approximately over a billion" (1965(5), 2). A consumer magazine featuring comparative tests would help consumers root their purchasing decisions in the functional utility of the tested products, as opposed to their emotional and identity-related benefits that advertising often highlighted. The magazine was intended as an evaluation device that would allow consumers to sever their reliance on the devices designed and made available by suppliers (e.g., advertisements).

The magazine quickly grew popular with consumers. With the highly public and provocative social critic Poul Henningsen as the editor, 50,000 copies of the first issue of THINK were sold on the very same day of its release, resulting in the printing of an additional 30,000 copies, which also sold out within a week (1989(2), 3; 1994(7), 5). The magazine thus entered the agential arsenal of many Danish consumers.

5.6.2 Framing Choice as Configuring Evaluation Agency

What kind of evaluation agency arose from consumers reading the magazine? What modes of evaluation did this evaluation device afford? Over the years, THINK has been concerned with reformatting the test results so they would give consumers the evaluative capabilities that it believed they needed in order to address the most pressing evaluation challenges of their time. While THINK was born in an era of information scarcity in which suppliers and their ads were the main source of evaluations, THINK found itself in a vastly different informational environment by the 1990s:

> More or less serious treatment of consumer issues has begun taking up much space in other media, and many suppliers are at the same time trying to camouflage sales messages as factual consumer information […]. Amidst this bombardment of information there are still many Danes who feel a need to receive well-documented information about the consumer society we are living in, and THINK will continue to try to meet this need. (1994(1), 3)

Information relevant for assessing the value of products was no longer hard for consumers to come by, but for THINK, this change far from spelled the end of consumers' evaluation troubles. Consumers now had to navigate a complex landscape of information to make rational purchasing decisions, which meant that it was still difficult "to be a conscious consumer", as one editorial of THINK remarked in 1988 (1988(8), 2). Making 'smart' decisions would often require tremendous effort if consumers were left to do this completely on their own:

> [Y]ou must be smart if you want to spend your money wisely […] [S]ometimes you just get worn out. When the costs of being smart and acting rationally get so high that you miss the beech bursting into leaf, it is probably time to turn your back on complexity and enjoy the spring in all its simplicity. (2011(116), 2)

In this new informational environment, consumers needed different evaluation equipment from before. With less of a void of information to fill, THINK found it crucial to reduce the complexity of the information environment and thereby make it easier to make rational purchasing decisions. It was no longer enough to make consumers think on their own; THINK felt a need to assume a greater role in thinking *for* consumers. Reflecting this new role, it changed its slogan in 2014 from "Think before you buy" to "We think before you buy" (2013(146), 2).

Its more assertive role is clearly reflected in the shifting formatting of the test results in the magazine. In the infancy of THINK, the test results were communicated via various measurement systems. Sometimes products were awarded a numerical score, sometimes a mathematical symbol (e.g., +) or a geometric symbol (e.g., a triangle or a box) and at yet other times no symbol at all, but rather a written appraisal of how well the products had performed. But from the 1980s, THINK increasingly began to rate products using a standardized measurement system for reporting test results. The ideographic ratings table – in which the performance of the tested products across a select set of criteria is reported via ideographs side-by-side in a table – began to appear more and more frequently and from the early 1990s, THINK used this measurement device for almost all its tests. Consistently using ideographs to present test results made it easier for consumers to figure out whether a specific product had performed satisfactorily in the test. Compare the two tables in Figures 2 and 3 below.

Figure 3 Child car seat test from 1970

Mærke	M 69 „A"	Barn-bilstolen	Klippan	Lyx 66	Niki spezial
Pris pr. dec. 1969	94,50	42,00	248,00	42,50	62,50
Brugsanvisning	nej	nej	svensk	nej	tysk
Begyndende alvorlige forandringer	160 kg	90 kg	–	80 kg	90 kg
Endeligt brud	235 kg	150 kg	375 kg	140 kg	140 kg
Montering	forlæns el. baglæns på forsæderyg	forlæns el. baglæns på forsæderyg	forlæns på bagsædet el. baglæns ved instrumentbræt	forlæns el. baglæns på forsæderyg	forlæns el. baglæns på forsæderyg
Bemærkninger			Der skete intet før selen blev trukket ud af stoleryggen ved 375 kg		

NOTE.—Note the fifth row entitled 'Point of breaking' (Danish: 'Endeligt brud'), which designates the kilograms of force seats can tolerate before breaking.

Figure 2 Child car seat test from 1993

Fremadvendte stole	Vægt-klasse	Sikkerhed	Komfort	Let i brug	Let at montere
Britax – se Römer					
24 Britax Freeway	9-18 kg	o	++	++	+
25 Concord C1	9-18 kg	-/o	++	+	o
26 Concord Delta	9-18 kg	-/o	-	++	- -
27 Fair Bimbo Plus	9-18 kg	o	-	++	+
28 Jeenay Super Recliner B25	9-18 kg	+	+	+	+
29 Klippan Super Dreamseat Recliner	9-18 kg	-/o	+	+	++
30 Römer King	9-18 kg	+	++	++	++
31 Römer Peggy	9-18 kg	+	++	++	++
32 Silver Cross Presti Softy	9-18 kg	o	-	o	-
33 Storchenmühle Europa 1	9-18 kg	+	-	+	+

NOTE.—Note the third column entitled 'Safety' (Danish: 'Sikker-hed'), which represents the performance of the seats using ideographs.

The first table presents the test results from the 1970 test of child car seats (1970(4), 12). In indicating the value of the tested seats, THINK listed how much force the seats could tolerate, reported as how many kilograms of force each seat could withstand before breaking (235 kg, 150 kg, etc.). With the introduction of ideographs, as illustrated in the second table reporting the results from a test of child car seats in 1993 (Forbrugerrådet, 1993, p. 7), this piece of information disappeared. The measurement of force the seats could withstand was replaced by an ideograph (e.g., ++, +, 0, -, or --) denoting the degree to which the seats had lived up to the criteria THINK had defined for satisfactory performance. THINK thus to a greater degree championed *its own* interpretation of the test results and concealed the 'messy' scientific details (e.g., the exact measurement of force) that would alternative interpretations to be reached. Put differently, the ideographs reduced the complexity of the test results, helping consumers more easily read the tests, but thereby also reduced consumers' opportunity to form their own opinion on whether the tested products had performed satisfactorily. While consumers using the test became equipped to overcome the 'bombardment of information' they were experiencing in the modern marketplace, they were simultaneously equipped to follow the prescriptions of THINK in their purchasing decisions.

In the early 1990s, THINK assumed an even tighter grip on the interpretation of the test results. Up until this point, it had rated the performance of products across the tested criteria *separately* without awarding products an average rating. But from the 1990s, THINK began awarding products a 'summary rating', which summarizes how the tested products perform across all the criteria. The summary rating is more than a mere average of the scores received across each test criterion. As THINK does not deem all criteria to matter equally for the value of products, it calculates the summary rating by weighting the criteria. In their 2001 test of child car seats, for example, the performance on 'safety' criteria accounted for 40% of the rating, while 'usability' accounted for 60%. The introduction of the summary rating was also accompanied by the introduction of 'restrictive criteria', which meant that products were prevented from receiving a summary rating exceeding the score they received on the criteria designated as the restrictive ones, regardless of how well the products had performed on other criteria. In the 2001 test of car seats, the seats could not receive a summary rating higher than the score they received on 'safety' even though 'safety' only accounted for 40% of the rating. Again, we see THINK guiding consumers more assertively in how the details of the test should be read.

Indicating the effects of this formatting intervention, retailers often express frustration regarding consumers' tendency to follow THINK's easy-to-read summary rating. Asked about how consumers use the test results to evaluate car seats, store manager Jesper explains:

> They pay attention to the headlines. Let's say, 90% of customers pay attention to the headlines. They are going to say, "well okay, I've had a look at this one, it was a test-winner, it must be a good seat", okay.

Birthe similarly notes that consumers often just "read the end result", purchasing the product that has "received the most stars" without considering whether the product with the highest summary rating suits their particular needs. These statements indicate that the tests in their simplified form helped produce evaluation agents for whom the "end result" became the overriding criterion for choosing between products. As Birthe notes, the effect of the rise of such an evaluation agent was that consumers would withhold their purchases for not only poorly performing products but for any product falling short of meeting THINK's criteria for what qualified as an exceptional product across all product parameters.

Consumers equipped with the summary ratings did not only exert their influence on the market for car seats through their actual consumption choices but also through their anticipated choices. Anticipating that many consumers would be guided by the summary ratings without giving much consideration to other criteria, some suppliers adjusted their offering so that it appealed to the imagined inclinations of such consumers. THINK employee Carsten for example explains how Bilka, one of the biggest supermarket chains in Denmark, employed the summary ratings to decide which child car seats to sell in its stores (2010(105), 44):

> At one point, Bilka had started to sell a lot of safety equipment for children. But people were not really convinced that it was good enough. They kept going to the children's stores where people traditionally buy prams and car equipment […] And then Bilka decided that they only wanted to sell car seats that at a minimum had received the rating of 'good' in our test. That was an amazing success, yes, and we were very proud.

Bilka's decision reflects the ontological weight given by some suppliers to the evaluation agent that looks first and foremost at THINK's summary rating when evaluating goods. Suppliers often acted as if this evaluation agent was real and intervened in their market offering so that it would be favorably evaluated by this agent, as the example of Bilka illustrates.

Figure 4 The prescriptive logos of THINK

NOTE.—From the left: the test-winner logo, the best buy logo, and the avoid logo.

Another intervention into the formatting of the test results that also significantly reconfigured the agency of the test–consumer assemblage is the introduction of 'prescriptive logos'. From the early 2000s, THINK began designating the products that had performed most satisfactorily in each test by awarding these products with a 'test winner' logo. Later, other logos were added to the test articles in the magazine. The 'best buy' logo designated the product that would give consumers most functional value for their money, and the 'avoid' logo designated products that were potentially harmful to consumers and should therefore be avoided. As a formatting innovation, the logos further helped consumers navigate the messiness of the test results, often with considerable effect, as Carsten recounts:

> "[W]e experienced that a lot of readers did not care at all about our long tables, they really just wanted to know which product was the best. Many people acted that way. Once I was interviewing a lady who had 12 'test winner' products. She did not care at all about the tests, she just wanted to know which product we had elected as the best, and then she bought that one."

The introduction of the test winner logo also led the way to an even bigger transformation in how the test results were formatted. In 2010 THINK began to license the use of their 'test winner' logo to suppliers wanting to use its test results to promote their products. Using the logo for promotional ends quickly grew popular with suppliers and made the THINK tests available to a greatly expanded number of consumers. Now, any customer, whether subscribing to the THINK magazine or not, could come across its test results as they appeared in logo-ized format in the promotional communication of suppliers. But consumers who accessed the test results as a supplier-promoted test winner logo were equipped with radically different evaluative capacities than those reading the test results in the magazine. Fearing that suppliers would misrepresent their test results (1970(3), 5; 1971(8), 25; 1992(1), 32; 1995(6), 3; 2004(44), 5), THINK demanded that suppliers using the logo promotionally could not make any reference to how products other than their own had performed in the test. In other words, to use the logo, suppliers had to divorce the test results from the evaluative apparatus of the ideographic ratings table and strip consumers of the evaluative capacities this table afforded. Consumers would not for example be able to gauge the margin that separated a test-winning product from a non-test-winning product. The pictures below (Figure 5) illustrate the simplistic presentation of the test results when featured in the advertisements of suppliers.

Figure 5 THINK's test-winner logo used in advertisements

The examples presented here illustrate the argument that THINK’s attempts to make its evaluations actionable implied a transformative translation of the higher-order value of functionality. The devices did not simply ‘capabilize’ consumers to evaluate the functional utility of products but rather invited them to engage in a particular mode of evaluating utility. The summary rating, the ideographic ratings table, and the prescriptive logos all helped constitute the consumer as a powerful evaluation agent, equipped with the capacity to swiftly compare the functional utility of products but also deprived of the opportunity to use the test results to reach evaluations divergent from those promoted by THINK. What emerged, then, was a consumer allied with THINK in choosing the winners of the markets, as THINK defined them, and weeding out the products that failed to live up to THINK’s criteria.

5.7 Discussion

If consumer activism is defined as organized efforts to change markets and society to the benefit of consumers (Lang & Gabriel, 2015, pp. 170–192), CWOs qualify as an important activist actor. In this article, I have illustrated how CWOs, such as comparative-testing organizations, work towards advancing the consumer interest and I have argued that their activism is not adequately explained as attempts to assert a new set of higher-order values, as the conventional models of consumer activism would suggest. Drawing on insights from the sociology of valuation and evaluation, I have shown that the contribution of CWOs to setting the direction of market change is better understood as attempts to 'translate' higher-order values. Through the core watchdog activities of monitoring market actors (e.g., testing the quality of the products they produce) and disseminating the information that arises from their monitoring (e.g., publishing comparative tests in a consumer magazine), CWOs translate higher-order values into 'trials of value' and 'evaluation devices' that structure how higher-order values shape market change.

5.7.1 A New Model for Understanding How Consumer Activism Changes Markets

To identify the market-shaping capacities of CWOs, I have introduced a new theoretical model of consumer activism: the value-translation model. We can better appreciate the analytical benefits of this model if we discuss in more detail how it differs from the two conventional models of consumer activism – the sovereign-choice model and the ideological-performance model. The main differences between the three models are summarized in Table 1.

A key difference lies in how the models conceive of market change and the role of consumer activists in promoting change. From the perspective of the sovereign-choice model, consumer activism changes markets when consumers employ their consumption choices to make companies alter their practices so that they conform with consumers' higher-order values (Friedman, 1999). The ideological-performance model focuses less on the material pressure consumers can exert on companies, holding instead that consumer activists achieve change by discursively amplifying their values so they become increasingly shared by other market actors (Handelman & Fischer, 2018, p. 265). In this model, boycotts are for example not chiefly analyzed as an act of financially incentivizing companies to do good (Friedman, 1999, pp. 12–13) but rather as an expressive performance of values intended to achieve "culture change" (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004, p. 703). Kozinets and Handelman (2004, p. 703) make explicit the kind of change the ideological-performance model has been developed to capture when they argue that studies of boycotts should pay attention to how boycott movements not only achieve immediate practical effects (e.g., changing the practices of specific companies) but also how they express ideologies that may motivate more consumers to join the cause. This focus on the expressive enactment of ideologies as the source of market change is why the ideological-performance model is often applied to study change attempts that are rooted in discursive activity, such as the rhetorical protest strategy (Harold, 2004, p. 189) of culture jamming (Carducci, 2006; Holt, 2002; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Sandlin & Callahan, 2009). But as Kozinets and Handelman's (2004) comment about the potential ideological expressiveness of boycotting suggests, within the ideological-performance model, even change attempts often thought of as more 'tangible' than rhetorical interventions (e.g., withholding purchases) are analyzed for their capacity to generate change at the discursive-cultural level (Handelman & Fischer, 2018, p. 265).

The value-translation model agrees with the sovereign-choice model that choices are important for understanding how activists achieve change. But where the latter emphasizes consumers' choices themselves as the drivers of market change, the former points to the 'formatting' of choices as the activity from which change arises. The value-translation model stresses that facilitating choice is a site of political struggle not only because it enables consumers to choose but, more importantly, because it shapes *how* they choose. The way consumers recognize products as aligned with their values depends on the devising of trials of value, which test the link between values and objects, and evaluation devices, which convey the strength of the value–object link to consumers. Market change, seen from this perspective, occurs when consumers' choices are reformatted to push the market in new directions. We have for example seen how THINK made child car seat manufacturers improve the chemical safety of their seats as it devised a trial of value that alerted consumers to the chemical content of seats. In its chemical tests, THINK followed a principle of precaution and developed a strict procedure for accounting for the chemical safety of car seats that went beyond the legal requirements, which saw THINK judge seats harshly for containing problematic chemicals. THINK's demanding trial of value thus represented a highly particular procedure of categorizing seats as chemically safe or unsafe and amounted to a reformatting of consumer choice as it intervened in how consumers compared and chose between child car seats.

This view of market change – as a matter of formatting choices – also marks a difference to the ideological-performance model. This model holds that consumer activism is often intimately tied up with the collective negotiation of identity (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Valor et al., 2020). When activists succeed in discursively amplifying their higher-order values, the values become increasingly shared and come to govern the identity formation of an increasing number of market actors. As a result, the market will become increasingly populated by actors who share the activists' view of the market and their desire for change. Scaraboto and Fischer (2013, p. 1242) for example explain how key members of the Fatshionista movement spread their values by discussing their views on current fashion practices with other consumers on online fora, which ultimately led the consumers in question to form a "shared identity and a shared understanding of their situation". The amplification of values such as human rights made consumers adopt an identity as Fatshionistas – self-accepting, fat-positive fashion enthusiasts – who, from the position of their new identity, condemned the exclusivist practices of the fashion system. The value-translation model of consumer activism shifts attention from the creation of identities to the creation of acts, from subjectivity to agency. This shift is in part informed by the recognition that consumers' choices are often not a reflection of their identities and ethical beliefs but rather a product of their practical circumstances (e.g., lacking infrastructure for providing ethically desirable products) (Shove, 2010). But a more important point here is that even when consumers seem able to 'live out' their ethical identities and act ethically, they must rely on information (as produced through trials of value and conveyed through evaluation devices) for figuring out what constitutes an ethical course of action. In the case of the Fatshionista movement, the value-translation model would for example incline us to ask: how do the Fatshionistas translate the value of human rights into a set of criteria that allow them to deem some fashion practices exclusivist? And how does their mode of translation frame their horizon of conceivable action? The value-translation model stresses that equipping consumers to take ethical consumption choices is understood better as a process of shaping consumer agents than as a process of 'capabilizing' (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014) consumer subjects to act in harmony with their identities. The emphasis is on how consumers' equipment tilts them towards taking some courses of action over others and not on how it makes it "materially possible" (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014, p. 843) for consumers to perform the actions that 'naturally' follow on from their identity.

THINK serves as an empirical illustration of an actor that has tried to achieve change through the creation of consumer acts. In its early years, much of THINK's work has sought to change not how consumers think of themselves but rather reconfigure their capacity to act. The simplification of the test results and the introduction of the prescriptive logos, for example, were chiefly developed to help rational consumer agents maintain their capacity to make rational consumption choices in the face of an increasingly complex information landscape. At the same time, however, these formatting innovations did not only 'capabilize' consumers to be rational under the condition of informational complexity; they also channeled consumers' rationality into particular programs of action by reducing the interpretive flexibility of the tests and, hence, consumers' ability to reach interpretations different from those endorsed by THINK. This example also demonstrates how activist actors can direct change by shaping the agency of consumers. The narrowing of the test results meant that when consumers employed the tests of THINK to make consumption choices, they ended up promoting the unique way THINK accounts for value and thus supported its vision for change.

Table 4 A comparison of three theoretical models of consumer activism

	Sovereign-choice model	**Ideological-performance model**	**Value-translation model**
Main agent of activism	Individual consumers	Consumer movements	Consumer watchdog organizations
View of consumers	Sovereign choosers	Cultural communicators	Equipped choosers
View of power	Choice-making	Ideological performance	Choice-formatting
Valorization process(es) in focus	Negotiating higher-order values	Negotiating higher-order values	Organizing trials of value and equipping evaluation agents
Mechanism of change	Economically incentivizing market actors to comply with new values	Discursively aligning the identities of market actors with new values	Practically translating values into new programs of action
Illustrative studies	Friedman (1999), Micheletti (2003), and Stolle et al. (2005)	Giesler (2008), Scaraboto and Fischer (2013), and Valor et al. (2020)	Dubuisson-Quellier (2013, 2021) and Wheeler (2012)[8]

5.7.2 Towards the Study of Formalized Consumer Activism

The divergence in how the three models view the role of consumer activism in market change also bears implications for which actors they attribute importance to. The sovereign-choice and

[8] These studies are not studies of *consumer* activism but merit mention here because they study kinds of activism relevant for consumers (e.g., Fair Trade) and their analytical approach to activism exhibits many of the qualities that define the value-translation model.

ideological-performance models share a tendency to portray consumers as the primary agents of consumer activism. For the former, it is individual consumers who, by virtue of the material pressure they can impose on companies through their individual consumption choices, possess agency, while the latter tends to grant agency to consumers acting in more collective ways. Consumer movements, for example, are often the focal agent here because such movements use communicative action to change the culture of markets (Chatzidakis et al., 2021; Gollnhofer et al., 2019; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Valor et al., 2020; Weijo et al., 2018). The sovereign-choice and ideological-performance models thus both focus on consumers and their more or less collectively organized activities, which has made scholars call for research on consumer activism that "examine[s] a greater range of categories of actors" and pays attention to "the range of roles that diverse social actors can play in instances of activism" (Handelman & Fischer, 2018, p. 268).

The introduction of the value-translation model helps us understand the role of a more formally organized actor of consumer activism, namely consumer watchdog organizations. It makes explicit the distinct form of activism that CWOs are capable of through their core activities – monitoring markets and raising awareness of activities that go against the consumer interest. These activities are interventions into the politics of value that govern market valorization and can alter these politics to reorient the market towards valorizations that better serve consumers.

To be fair, the extant literature has paid some attention to the link between formal organizations and consumer activism. Even if the sovereign-choice model sees consumer activism as rooted in the individual choices of consumers, organizational actors also play a role. Organizations, such as testing, certification, and labeling organizations, are analyzed as providers of information that enables consumers to distinguish ethical companies from unethical ones, good products from bad ones, and ultimately choose between them (Micheletti, 2003, pp. 73–117; Swagler, 1994; Thorelli, 1970). Organizations, in other words, enable consumers to make sovereign choices. In this view, however, organizations are not activist themselves but simply facilitate activism by providing activists with information. The value-translation model brings out the political nature of producing and propagating information. When THINK evaluates products, it competes with other evaluators, such as suppliers, in defining – not simply 'discovering' – the properties of products. And when THINK inscribes its evaluations into evaluation devices, it is not just disseminating information. Rather, it is seeking to weaken consumers' reliance on the evaluation equipment of suppliers and enroll consumers into a distributed evaluation agent that is likely to follow the prescriptions of THINK. As Callon and Muniesa (2005, p. 1239) argue, this perspective opens a "new way of conceiving of the relations of domination running through and structuring markets" and underlines the importance of studying choice-formatting and not only choice-making as a form of consumer activism.

5.7.3 Practices of Value Translation

My study and its emphasis on value translation also contribute to the study of market valorization. In fact, this is not the first study to point to the centrality of translation processes in the valorization of objects. In her study of the phenomenon of 'value-in-disposition', Türe (2014) for example notes how the value of objects can mutate when their owners dispose of them and move them into new 'value regimes'. Circulating through value regimes, objects are continuously reassessed based on shifting "ideologies and sign systems" (Türe, 2014, p. 55). Donating an old shirt, for example, reconstructs the shirt as a gift and associates it with the value regime of altruism, whereby the shirt accrues "moral value" (Türe, 2014, p. 60). Gollnhofer et al. (2019, p. 463) make a similar argument, pointing to the importance of "object pathways", which "materially manifest" higher-order values and transform the value of the objects passing through them. Dumpster diving, understood as an object pathway, draws on the value of sustainability to recategorize disposed of food items from waste to a valuable, untapped food resource. Figueirerdo and Scaraboto (2016) also focus on the translations unfolding during object circulation, showing how the circulation of objects leads to the translation between different forms of value (potential, indexical, value outcomes, and microcultural values). Like Türe (2014) and Gollnhofer et al. (2019), they note how the value (or perceived benefit) of objects can be reconstructed when reassessed against alternative higher-order values (or in their terms, microcultural values).

Each of these studies demonstrates how certain practices may translate – that is, both transport and transform – objects. The main lesson is that practices transform the value of objects when they detach them from prevalent higher-order values and attach them to new ones. It is for example by being detached from the higher-order value of profitability and attached to that of sustainability that a piece of thrown-out food can become valuable anew.

While such detachment–attachment translations are an important type of translation and can help us explain fundamental transformations of value (e.g., from waste to value), my study points to a more subtle but no less important type. The value translations studied in this article relate to processes of transforming value without replacing the higher-order values that serve as referents for valorization. The tests of THINK, understood as practices of object transformation, most often do not seek to introduce new higher-order values but rather modify how the prevailing values orient valorizations. THINK has devised its trials of value to change how the link between objects and the value of functionality is tested and, concomitantly, how objects are attributed functional value. While such translations may appear less important than those previously studied, their implications for consumers could be monumental. Consider the focal case of this study, child car seats. How the higher-order value of functionality is translated into safety criteria that guide consumers in comparing the safety of different seats could decide whether consumers end up buying a seat that will keep their children safe. In this case, the subtle, mundane translation processes studied here could be a question of life and death.

5.8 Limitations and Future Research

When employing the value-translation model in future studies of consumer activism, it will be important to keep in mind that it is a *theoretical model* and, as such, does not refer to a specific type or tactic of consumer activism. The models discussed in this article bring out different facets of the activities consumer activists undertake to change markets. A boycott campaign may, for example, be analyzed through all three models: Applying the sovereign-choice model, one would analyze how consumers employ boycotting as an act of economically incentivizing companies to pursue change; applying the ideological-performance model, one would explore boycotts as expressive enactments of ideologies and trace the ideological effects of such enactments; and, finally, applying the value-translation model, one would turn attention to how the creators of the boycott campaign (typically formal organizations) practically organize the campaign to reformat the choices of consumers (e.g., which criteria are mobilized for targeting products for boycotting and how are consumers equipped to identify the targeted products?). The models direct attention towards different questions and thus each add to our understanding of the diverse roles of consumer activists in changing markets.

The value-translation model is particularly suited for studying CWOs as their core activities of monitoring and alerting, as this article has shown, have an important impact on how values are translated into consumer choices. But other models may reveal other aspects of watchdog activism. To further deepen our understanding of how CWOs change markets, it would for example also be useful to study their activities through the ideological-performance model and explore how their persistent championing of scientific values (e.g., objectivity and rigor) in the marketplace have shaped how consumers think of themselves as consumers. What role did THINK and its sister organizations in other countries for example play in creating the 'rational' consumer subject? And more generally, how do CWOs, or other formalized actors of consumer activism, differ from grassroots movements in pursuing change at the level of higher-order values?

While my study has shown how the value translations of a CWO change markets, it is clear that not all translations are equally powerful in setting the direction of market change. The study has stopped short of addressing why the translations of THINK were successful in changing how child car seats are valorized. Future studies could address this question by inquiring into the sources of translation power. In the face of competing trials of value and evaluation devices, what enables consumer activists to institutionalize their mode of value translation?

It will be equally important to address the boundary conditions of translation power. As I chose to primarily study the valorizations of one product category (i.e., child car seats) in order to illustrate the analytical benefits of the value-translation model, an important question that remains unanswered is whether CWOs and their translations are more impactful on how certain product categories are valorized than others. For example, does the way THINK defines the safety of a car seat impact the market for car seats more than the way it defines the efficiency of a washing machine impacts the market for washing machines? And if so, where do such differences in translation effects come from?

Answering these questions will help us refine the value-translation model of consumer activism and advance our knowledge of how formal consumer organizations, particularly CWOs, intervene in improving the market for the benefit of consumers.

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6 A Callonian Perspective on Choice and Consumer Empowerment[9]

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Abstract. Sociological theory has rightly problematized the notion that the ability to make 'informed choices' enables consumers to live their lives free from external influence. Information is never neutral but always prescriptive and therefore cannot deliver freedom of choice. Information is implicated in *constructing* choice rather than liberating it. But does this realization mean that we must give up on empowering consumers by equipping them with information? Is the enlightened and empowered consumer an unachievable neoliberal fantasy? Where this seem to be the conclusion of much sociological theorizing on consumer empowerment, we argue that enabling choice through information provision can still play an important role in empowering consumers. We make our case by developing a perspective on consumer empowerment informed by Callon's notion of 'calculative power'. We argue that we must consider how information is embedded in 'calculative devices', which configure consumers' calculative capacities, to unveil the empowering potential of information. Our conceptual discussion leads us to conclude that calculative devices are empowering if they (1) enrich consumers' calculative capacities, (2) grant consumers control of the temporal organization of the choice process, and (3) make themselves open to dispute. If calculative devices possess these three qualities, they strengthen consumers' calculative power and grant them more autonomy in the choice process. The Callonian perspective on consumer empowerment lights new research paths to be tread and particularly points towards studying how the new generation of digital decision tools, such as price comparison sites and online user reviews, configure consumers' power to calculate and choose.

Keywords: consumer empowerment, calculative power, choice, calculation

6.1 Introduction

Consumer empowerment has often been treated as a matter of giving consumers more choice or providing them with the information they need to make better choices (Friedman & Friedman, 2002).

[9] This chapter presents Article 3. The article has been submitted to the 2023 CCT Conference as a competitive paper.

In this view, the ability to make informed choices gives consumers the freedom to live life as they want. However, Foucauldian critiques have emphasized that this idea of consumer empowerment is problematic as it rests on the paradox that consumers have no choice but to choose if they want freedom (Shankar et al., 2006). Put differently, the freedom of choice is always accompanied by an imperative to choose. This paradox is perhaps most palpable in the critique of how the promotion of choice is used to empower consumers to make ethical choices. Critical scholarship has pointed out that when people are empowered to choose ethically (e.g., through the provisioning of product labels), it also becomes their responsibility to use their choices to solve ethical problems (Coll, 2013; Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Yngfalk, 2016), such as the climate crisis. It is from such a perspective that promoting choice has been argued to both empower consumers, granting them freedom, and disempower them, turning their freedom into a mechanism for governing their identities and conduct (Beckett, 2012; Beckett & Nayak, 2008; Du Gay, 1996; Miller & Rose, 1997; Rose, 2005).

The Foucauldian and related "poststructuralist" (Papaoikonomou & Alarcón, 2017, p. 42) literature on consumer choice has demonstrated that choice is not the product of consumers' free will. But in doing so, this literature has all but stripped consumers of agency. As Newton (1998, p. 429) has remarked in a critique of Foucauldian analysis, "though Foucauldians may note the freedom of subjects, their emphasis is largely upon the rationalities of discursive programmes" that govern people's conduct, such as the rationality of the 'responsible consumer' (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). In a similar way, the Foucauldian critique of choice focuses more on what is done to consumers' choices than how consumers 'do' choices. The emphasis lies with how consumer choice is brought into alignment with various rationalities (Beckett, 2012; Coll, 2013; Moisander et al., 2010; Yngfalk, 2016) and not with how consumers navigate the various attempts to make them choose according to these rationalities.

We propose to renew the discussion on empowerment-through-choice by providing a theoretical frame that acknowledges the Foucauldian critique that choice does not equate with freedom and yet addresses how consumers are enabled to – if not choose freely – become active parts of the choice-making process. We argue that both theoretical and practical concerns call for a new way of addressing the link between choice and consumer empowerment.

Theoretically, a new frame is needed to balance the Foucauldian argument. Foucauldians argue that "[c]hoice or the freedom to choose is […] a double-edged sword" (Shankar et al., 2006, p. 1021) that can be both "empowering or liberating" but also disempowering and constraining. Yet, most efforts have been directed at understanding the granting of choice as an act of disempowerment, and we have seen little discussion of how choice empowers consumers and how different ways of promoting choice may leave consumers in very different positions of freedom.

A new theoretical frame, however, is not solely needed for theoretical reasons. More closely discussing the empowering potential of choice also holds implications for actors, such as consumer organizations or makers of consumer policy, concerned with upholding consumers' ability to choose freely. The Foucauldian perspective risks giving the impression that empowerment-through-choice is a cause best abandoned. This perspective thus prevents us from discussing what choice interventions (e.g., the introduction of a label) are most compatible with consumer empowerment and leaves little practical guidance as to how consumers may acquire greater freedom in their choices.

In this article, we propose that Callon and his collaborators' work on calculation (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010; Callon, 1998; Callon et al., 2002; Callon & Law, 2005; Callon & Muniesa, 2005) provides a useful lens for rethinking the connection between consumer empowerment and choice. Callon suggests that the ability to calculate lies at the heart of taking on an active role in choice-making. Without this ability, actors have little chance of figuring out which choices are in their own interest and risk marginalization. From this perspective, consumer empowerment becomes a matter of giving consumers 'calculative power' (Callon & Muniesa, 2005), equipping them with calculative devices that enable them to calculate their interests. What is key here is that the Callonian perspective allows us to discuss consumer empowerment without equating it with freedom or denying it on the grounds of consumers' status as subjected. Calculating consumers are never entirely 'free', as they owe their calculative capacities to their relations with other entities, but they may be more or less powerful depending on their equipment and the calculative capacities it provides. This perspective shifts from thinking of consumer empowerment as the simple provision of choice to thinking of consumer empowerment as configuring consumers' choice-making capacities, most centrally their calculative ones, to turn consumers more active in defining their choices.

In what follows, we will explicate Callon's notion of choice, calculation, and calculative power, and discuss what the Callonian perspective has to offer studies on consumer empowerment. We will do so by first providing a brief overview of how choice has been linked to empowerment in the existing literature. Then, we will discuss how the Callonian perspective addresses certain limitations in the dominant perspectives on empowerment-through-choice. We conclude by offering a few suggestions for how the Callonian perspective may inspire future research on consumer empowerment.

6.2 Choice and Consumer Empowerment

Three perspectives dominate the study of the relationship between choice and consumer empowerment: the choice-as-political-participation perspective, the choice-as-decision-making perspective, and the choice-as-moral-governance perspective. We organize the comparison of these perspectives along two axes of difference. The first axis captures the extent to which the perspectives see choice as a process, focusing on the practices by which consumers choose, or as an instrument or a means to an end, focusing on how choices are used to achieve some outcome. The second axis describes the extent to which the perspectives conceptualize choice as the outcome of individual decision-making or the outcome of more systemic processes.

The choice-as-political-participation perspective is a "liberal" (Shankar et al., 2006, p. 1014) view of consumer empowerment and treats choice as a means to consumers' participation in the ordering of markets. Consumers are seen as the heroes of markets in the sense that their choices drive market development (Shankar et al., 2006, p. 1014). Although rooted in economic theory (Friedman & Friedman, 2002), the choice-as-political-participation also runs through the literature on political consumerism (Micheletti, 2003) and ethical consumption (Harrison et al., 2005). This literature emphasizes that, by being granted choice, individual consumers become capable of expressing and promoting their moral values through the market (Micheletti, 2003). Consumers are here seen as rational and autonomous actors, a perspective that turns consumer empowerment into a project of removing obstacles to consumers' rational decision-making, such as limited options or lacking information about options. For consumers to wield their political agency and turn the market into an arena for politics, all they need is the opportunity to make informed choices (Berry & McEachern, 2005). This perspective builds on an individualistic view of choice, as it stresses that it is individuals that choose and it is the free will of individuals that are expressed through choice.

The choice-as-decision-making perspective is anchored in the field of behavioral decision-making (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). This perspective goes against the assumption of consumer rationality, stressing that consumers are rarely capable of acting rationally because of their limited cognitive capacity (Simon, 1955). The perspective therefore stresses that giving consumers more choice or choice-related information is not necessarily liberating or enable political participation because doing so can result in a situation of 'choice overload' (Scheibehenne et al., 2010). In such situations, consumers are overwhelmed by the complexity of the choice task at hand (Mick et al., 2004). The focus here rests not on choice as a means – what people do with choices (e.g., achieve market change) –

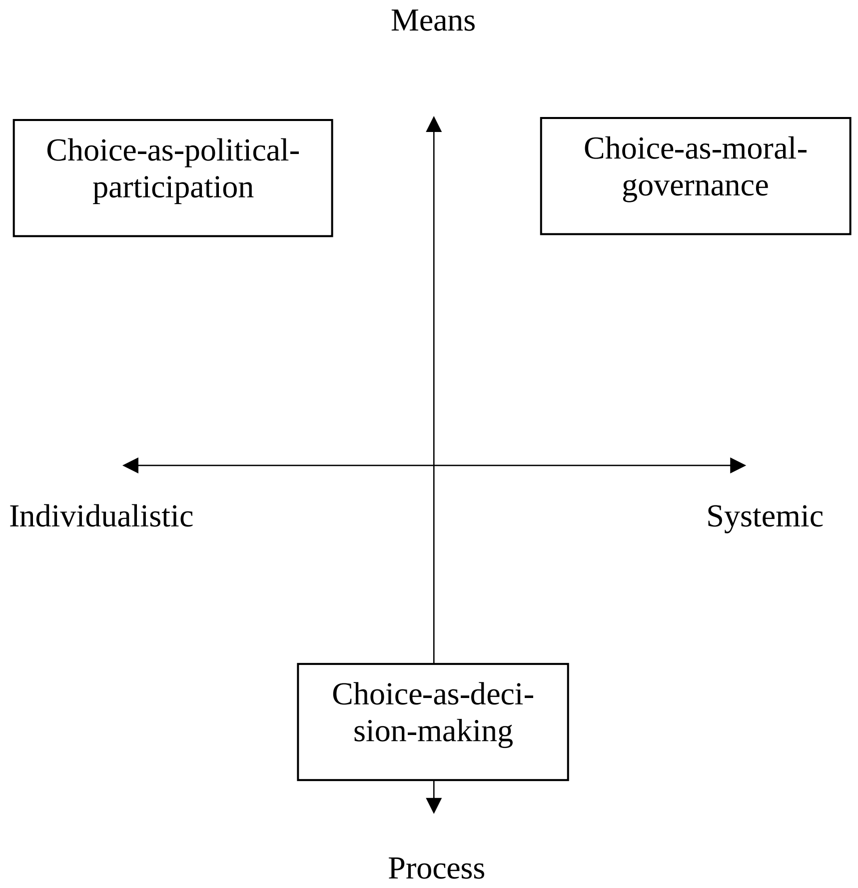
but on the processes by which consumers use decision shortcuts, or choice heuristics, to cope with the cognitive demands of the choice task at hand.

The choice-as-decision-making perspective is less individualistically oriented than the perspective of choice-as-political-participation because it recognizes that factors beyond the individual play a role in the shaping of choices. In particular, the perspective calls attention to the influence of ‘choice architectures’ (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009), the patterned ways that consumers’ options are presented to them in choice situations. Seeing that consumers’ choices are always influenced by choice architectures, the perspective advocates that consumer empowerment should take the form of designing decision tools that bring about *perceived* empowerment (Wathieu et al., 2002) or enable consumers to make choices that improve their welfare (Howells, 2005; Ratner et al., 2008).

Even if the choice-as-decision-making perspective recognizes that choice is not entirely individualistic, there is a limit to how deep the systemic production of choice runs in this perspective. While the perspective does acknowledge that the presentation of choice options matters, it does not account for the knowledge systems that make choice options meaningful. For example, while the perspective may invite attention to how the sustainability of a product is described to the consumers in choice situations, it does not address the more systemic questions of how sustainability comes to matter for consumers or how sustainability is turned into a knowable dimension of products. Knowledge (e.g., the conceptualization and measurement of sustainability) is innocent; it is only its presentation that has choice-shaping effects.

The ‘choice-as-moral-governance’ perspective is the final dominant perspective and turns to the kinds of systemic, knowledge-oriented questions raised above. The perspective promotes a “discursive model of power” (Denegri-Knott et al., 2006, p. 961) that is grounded in Foucauldian theories of governmentality. The perspective is attuned to trace the power/knowledge relations underpinning the construction of the choosing consumer (Schwarzkopf, 2011), focusing on how different discourses revolving around choice and consumer sovereignty put consumers into subject positions where they are “encouraged to shape their lives by the use of their purchasing power and to make sense of their existence by exercising their freedom to choose” (Du Gay, 1996, pp. 76–77). While giving consumers choice is acknowledged to be both empowering and disempowering (Shankar et al., 2006), studies employing a choice-as-moral-governance perspective tend to study choice as an means of governing consumers and aligning their identities and modes of conduct with the rationalities of discourses. Such studies have for example demonstrated how instruments that supposedly promote consumer choice, such as date labels (Yngfalk, 2016) or loyalty cards (Beckett, 2012; Coll, 2013), operate as “technologies of consumption” that “tie the identities and aspirations of consumers to the strategic imperatives of producers” (Beckett, 2012, p. 16) and policymakers (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). In this perspective, choice production is deeply systemic, rooted in the discursive systems that subjectify consumers, and the role of the individual in making choices is reduced to the ‘actualizer’ (Yngfalk, 2016) of the dominant discourses that govern them. As choices are thought to largely follow the rationalities of the dominant discourses, this perspective is minimally concerned with the processes by which consumers actually choose.

Figure 6: Overview of the dominant perspectives on choice and consumer empowerment



The choice-as-moral-governance perspective does not deny the possibility for consumer empowerment (see e.g., Papaoikonomou & Alarcón, 2017) but stresses that empowering consumers through the provision of choice is, ultimately, a weak form of empowerment. Rather, genuine empowerment happens when consumers are put into positions where they become capable of "thinking outside of the knowledge systems which frame us" (Shankar et al., 2006, p. 1026).

What we see from the existing literature is that it is mostly concerned with choice as a *means*, either of empowerment (choice-as-political-participation) or disempowerment (choice-as-moral-governance). When choice *is* studied as a process (choice-as-decision-making), choice is taken to be a largely individualistic activity. The current theoretical resources for discussing choice as a process of empowerment thus does not allow us to address the role of consumers in the systemic construction of choice. In this article, we propose a set of theoretical resources that enable us to situate the consumer as an active participant in choice construction. Such an approach will enable us to better address what it means to empower consumers through the enablement of consumer choice.

We propose that Callon's theorizing on calculation, and particularly the notion of 'calculative power' (Callon & Muniesa, 2005), provides a useful lens for understanding some of the key processes by which consumers exert power in choice-making while acknowledging that choice is always systemically produced. To understand what the Callonian perspective has to offer, we first must understand what he means by calculation, to which we turn next.

6.3 Distributed Calculation

Callon, with his various collaborators (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010; Callon & Law, 2005; Callon & Muniesa, 2005), treats calculation as one of the central processes of choice-making. Calculation is what allows actors to distinguish different options from each other and estimate the consequences of these options. However, Callon does not treat human beings as calculative by nature. This is where he for example diverges from classical economic theory, which assumes that actors have an innate inclination to calculate and from nature are endowed with the cognitive capacities to do so. Rather, Callon argues that actors can be *made* calculable by becoming equipped with 'calculative devices', whereby they come to form part of 'calculative agencies', humans and material devices merged in assemblages capable of calculating (Callon & Muniesa, 2005). For Callon, calculation is a distributed process: "calculation and noncalculation reside not primarily within human subjects but in material arrangements, systems of measurement, and methods of displacement or their absence" (Callon & Law, 2005, p. 718). Best-before labels attached to products at the supermarket are a good example of how calculative devices help construct calculative capacities. Best-before labels equip consumers' cognition, both enabling and encouraging them to calculate which product to choose based on the freshness of products. The calculation is distributed across consumers' minds, the methods of measuring and certifying food freshness, and the visual format of the label. All these elements – cognitions, measurement systems, and visual forms – form part of the calculative agency, because they all make a difference for how calculations are performed and the choices that result.

As is clear from this example, calculation does here not refer to the mere exercise of quantitative, price-based computing (e.g., what box of cereal costs the least per gram?) but is defined in more expansive terms. Characteristic of the calculative way of evaluating is the establishment of relations between entities and, based on those relations, the estimation of what the relative merits are of choosing one entity over the others. As Callon, with Muniesa (2005, p. 1231), summarizes:

> Calculation starts by establishing distinctions between things or states of the world, and by imagining and estimating courses of action associated with those things or with those states as well as their consequences

Defined this way, calculation may be based on distinctions that are quantitative (e.g., price differences) in character but also qualitative ones (e.g., the freshness of food).

To figure out which distinctions are likely to figure centrally in consumers' calculations, we must look at how they present themselves to consumers within 'calculative spaces' (Callon & Muniesa, 2005). Calculative spaces shape calculations by representing the entities to be calculated in a common, physical space and, through deploying various calculative devices, propose how these entities relate. A supermarket shelf, for example, qualifies as a calculative space because it draws a large but limited set of products together into a single space and is furnished with calculative devices, such as date labels and price tags, that help give rise to a rich relationality among these products. The shelves thereby equip consumers with an arsenal of calculative capacities for calculating their possible choices (i.e., estimating the consequences of different choices and, on this basis, classifying and ranking them).

For Callon, thinking of calculation this way exposes the intimate relationship between calculation and power. If we accept that calculation is not a naturally given capacity of individuals, we realize that calculative equipment and the calculative capacities they provide can be highly unevenly distributed in markets. The Callonian perspective suggests that understanding the distribution of 'calculative power' (Callon & Muniesa, 2005) is key to understanding power relations in markets, because without calculative power, actors "rapidly sink into exclusion or cease to exist" (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010, p. 13).

Yet, Callon also stresses that acquiring calculative power is not simply a matter of amassing equipment. The supermarket shopper again provides an appropriate illustration. Armed to the teeth with calculative devices, including "[p]ackaging, shelves, proximity between products, brands, labels and promotions" (Callon & Muniesa, 2005, p. 1238), this shopper is heavily equipped to calculate. Yet, consumers strolling through the supermarket often find themselves in a disadvantaged position:

> Buyers very frequently use the calculative tools that are more or less explicitly proposed to — if not imposed on — them. They abandon their own autonomy. Of course, they continue to calculate, i.e. to evaluate their attachment to a good, but they do so by means of tools designed by the seller. By walking down supermarket aisles, inspecting shelves and reading labels, consumers continue a calculation that was started and framed by qualified professionals. (Callon & Muniesa, 2005, p. 1239)

If it is not the quantity of calculative devices but rather their quality that determines whether they empower consumers' calculative and choice-making agency, we must discuss which qualities grant these devices the potential to empower. We identify three qualities that are likely to foster calculative power. Calculative devices are empowering if they 1) expand the list of entities to be calculated within calculative spaces and the relations that define their hierarchy and classification, 2) allow consumers to temporally control calculative spaces, and 3) render calculative spaces open to dispute. Below, I elaborate why these qualities are essential for the calculative empowerment of consumers.

6.4 Enriching Calculative Spaces

First, devices enhance the calculative power of consumers if they enable consumers to “establish a long, yet finite list of diverse entities” and “allow rich and varied relations between the entities thus selected, so that the space of possible classifications and reclassifications is largely open” (Callon & Muniesa, 2005, p. 1238). Being able to calculate the potential consequences of a long list of options generates ‘discretion’, that is, the power to act or not to act (Law, 1991, p. 170). This is one of the most fundamental differences between a strong and a weak calculative agency. Paraphrasing Law (1991, p. 171), we may argue that strong calculative agencies concentrate not only capacity for action, but discretion in its use. Both strong and weak calculative agencies have the power to act but strong ones to a greater extent hold the power to weigh the benefits of different lines of action and thus choose between them.

A good example of a calculative device that reconfigures the calculative agency of consumers in this way is consumption mobile apps and particularly the Yuka app studied by Soutjis (2020). Yuka is an app that allows consumers to scan products and obtain a rating of their quality based on a set of criteria. The app enrichens consumers’ calculative spaces in two ways. First, the app helps construct a calculative space which extends the list of entities to be calculated. When a consumer scans a product in a supermarket and the apps presents consumers with a negative rating, it suggests an alternative, higher-rated product to purchase. Sometimes, this alternative is not to be found on the shelves of the supermarket where the consumer finds himself. That means that, without the app, consumers are only able to consider the products available on the shelves in front of them, but with the app, the calculative space is extended beyond the physical limits of the supermarket to also include the products at the shelves at other supermarkets (Soutjis, 2020, p. 120). The second way Yuka enriches consumers' calculative spaces is by broadening consumers' ability to classify and rank products. By rating products based on the criteria of nutrition, food safety, and the degree to which the product is organically produced, the app adds new sets of relations among products to the relations already proposed by the equipment at the supermarket (e.g., brands, price tags, product labels, etc.). Jointly, this adding of entities and relations allow consumers to consider the relative merits of an expanded range of options and strengthens their discretion in deciding what to buy or whether to buy anything at all.

It is worth noting here that discretion does not make consumers entirely 'free'. Consumers are no less immersed in "relations of prescription" (2005, p. 1238) when they are looking up product ratings on their mobile phones than when they rely on the calculative devices already present at the supermarket. But, as Callon and Muniesa (2005, p. 1238) argue, some of these relations may "multiply their reflection and action". Consumers are capable of calculating *because of* and not *despite of* their relations to other actors, such as mobile phone apps and their creators. As Law (1991, p. 168) succinctly states, "relations and capacities [are] indissolubly linked".

What is also important here is that when evaluating whether a calculative device enhances the calculative power of consumers, one must not look at the device itself – e.g., the information it conveys – but rather how it reconfigures calculative spaces. The difference of attention is subtle but significant. Consider the case of best-before labels again. If one considers the device in isolation, one sees that best-before labels add a new relation – food freshness – based on which new hierarchies among products may emerge. Best-before labels allow consumers to pick the freshest food items on the shelves. But if one considers how best-before labels have transformed the calculative space of the supermarket, one sees that best-before labels are not solely empowering, as Yngfalk (2016) has shown in his exploration of how label transform supermarket practices. The introduction of best-before labels has encouraged retailers to remove products approaching the best-before date from the shelves, even before they go bad, "since these products are typically considered by retailers to exert a negative impact on consumer perceptions of both the products and the store brand" (Yngfalk, 2016, p. 283). This move narrows the list of calculable entities that consumers meet in the calculative spaces of the supermarket in important ways. It for example means that consumers' discretion in making choices based on environmental concerns is weakened, since the most environmentally beneficial choice – i.e., choosing the oldest food and thereby helping reduce food waste – is closed off to them. In this way, best-before labels both enhance and limit consumers' calculative power.

Being attentive to calculative spaces rather than the devices themselves also addresses the issue of choice overload. While individual devices may add entities and relations to the calculative space, if the calculative space already abounds with calculative resources – a situation Callon and Law (2005) call 'calculative proliferation' – the adding of entities and relations may not result in enhanced discretion. Here, calculation is impeded "by an excess of resources that interact with and undermine one another" (Callon & Law, 2005, p. 731). When calculative resources abound, they risk drowning out each other.

In short, calculative devices empower consumers if they enrich calculative spaces, either in terms of extending the list of calculable entities or the relations that enable their classification.

6.5 Temporally Sequencing Calculative Spaces

Enriching calculative spaces is not the only way calculative devices may enhance consumers' calculative power. They can also do so by allowing consumers to control at which points in the choice process calculative spaces are available to consumers. Calculative devices temporally organize calculative spaces by making available calculative resources at particular points of the encounter between buyers and sellers. To realize the importance of this fact for calculative power of consumers, just consider what would happen if the prices of products were not listed in-store but only became available on the receipt handed to the consumer upon buying the products. Consumers would still be able to figure price into their calculations, but it would be too late to have any impact on their choice. In this situation, consumers' calculations are temporally displaced to after the choice has been made.

This is obviously a hypothetical example. But studies have demonstrated that the temporal organization of calculative spaces does not solely matter in the world of hypotheticals. Consider Mallard's (2007) study of the consumer magazines that consumer organizations like Que Choisir publishes. Consumer magazines offer product comparisons and enable consumers to choose which products to buy while still in their homes. Consumer magazines thereby offer the opportunity "to separate the emergence of choice and the purchase and to distribute them to two different time-frames and situations" (Mallard, 2007, p. 156). That is, not only does the consumer magazine provide consumers with new calculative resources in the form of product reviews, it also grants them control over the temporal organization of the choice process. A calculative space emerges – the product comparison table in the magazine – prior to entering the supermarket, allowing consumers to calculate and choose at a distance from the calculative devices of sellers.

Cochoy (2008) provides an example of how calculative devices may work against consumers and limit their power to decide at what moment in the market encounter the calculative space emerges. Cochoy focuses on how the shopping cart sequences the calculative spaces of the supermarket. He argues that as products are moved into the shopping cart, they are severed from the price labels on the shelves, which leaves consumers with little chance of calculating the financial value of the contents of the cart. For Cochoy, this encourages mass shopping, as it pushes budgetary constraints towards the background of consumers' calculation of their choices (Cochoy, 2008, pp. 20–21). The cart "first makes one 'de-calculate', and encourages for a time the accumulation of things without calculation, rejecting the financial assessment until later" (Cochoy, 2008, p. 21). In other words, the calculative device of the cart postpones financial calculations until the moment of purchase, in effect temporally integrating these two moments. In this situation, consumers have little control over the temporal availability of calculative spaces. Consumers cannot carry price labels with them – they remain fixed to the shelf – and it is largely beyond the power of consumers to make the financially-oriented calculative space re-emerge until the moment of purchase. As a result, consumers' calculative power diminishes, as the devices of the shopping cart and the price labels lock consumers into a particular temporal sequence of calculating, choosing, and purchasing products.

6.6 Opening Calculative Spaces to Dispute

We propose that the final quality that calculative devices must possess to promote the calculative empowerment of consumers is that they make the classifications and hierarches emerging from calculative spaces open to dispute. The importance of this quality must be understood in relation to the first quality discussed, the enriching of calculative spaces. When we argue that the adding of relations among calculable entities is empowering, we ignore the risk that the relations and the classifications they produce are deceptive. Indeed, within this perspective, any relation added, no matter how weak its base, amounts to a strengthening of consumers' calculative power. Just consider how companies may falsely advertise their products as something they are not. This is a relation added, but hardly an empowerment of consumers. How do consumers ensure, then, that calculative devices are not deceptive?

One answer would be to say that calculative devices must speak the 'truth'. For example, best-before labels should adhere to the laws of biological degradation. But it is central to the Callonian perspective that there is no such thing as a single, unnegotiable truth. Products do not possess some inherent set of qualities but must be 'qualified' (Callon et al., 2002) to acquire their qualities and can be qualified in multiple ways. Even something as technical as classifying the freshness of food based on biological degradation can be done in a variety of ways. For example, should the deterioration of freshness be classified as the loss of taste or the buildup of harmful substances? And, if freshness is based on taste criteria, when has a particular food item lost so much of its taste that it cannot be classified as fresh? There are no ‘technical’ answers to these questions and no answers that would help us arrive at some universal truth about the freshness of food.

We suggest that calculative devices, if they are to grant calculative power, should be open to dispute. We thereby avoid putting ourselves into the tricky position of being the ultimate judge of which logic of qualification is most appropriate. Rather, we argue, that is for consumers to decide, but the only way they can evaluate whether products are being qualified appropriately is by being able to criticize the logic of qualification that different calculative devices promote.

In insisting on the openness of calculative devices, we are guided by Boltanski and Thévenot’s (1999) sociology of critical capacity. Their work can be read as an exploration of how people are critical (e.g., of other people’s claims) and how they acquire the capacity to be so. Boltanski and Thévenot stress that whenever the value or character of something is being disputed, agreement is reached through what they call ‘reality tests’, that is, procedures by which actors seek to justify their actions by appealing to higher-order principles of value. The creation of best-before labels can be seen as a reality test. Best-before labels seek to reduce the uncertainty regarding products and their value, thus allowing actors “to reach a grounded and legitimate agreement” (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, p. 367) on what the value of the product in question is. Specifically, best-before labels seek to ground agreement surrounding product value with reference to the freshness of the product.

The case of best-before labels also illustrates why it is so important that calculative devices are open to dispute. Even if best-before labels are supposed to be a test of the freshness of food, freshness is not the only criteria at play in the test. As Yngfalk (2016) explains, when companies decide the best-by date, they are also considering factors other than the biological degradation of products, as they for example “seek to prevent different shelf lives on similar products in the marketplace” to avoid confusing consumers even if the pace of the biological degradation of the products diverges. In the words of one manager, standardizing the best-by date “was a *marketing* decision” (Yngfalk, 2016, p. 285 emphasis added).

To sum up, it is important that consumers can dispute the reality tests that their calculative devices draw on. For example, for consumers to figure out whether the property of food freshness enacted by best-by labeling is ‘real’ and legitimate, they must have access to the workings of the reality test of labeling – which principles of value it deploys and how. This means that product relations capable of adding to consumers’ calculative power are those that are constructed in an ‘appropriate’ way, as established by consumers’ judgements of reality tests. We thus argue that the impact of calculative devices on consumers’ calculative power is greater if they are open to dispute. This quality enables consumers to better assess the kinds of influence that calculative devices wield over them.

6.7 Discussion

This article has sought to provide a new theoretical frame for discussing how choice may empower consumers, while taking seriously the perspective that choice is always ‘constructed’. We have attempted to restore the notion of consumer agency in choice-making, without treating consumer agency as an inherent capacity of choosing individuals, as Foucauldian analysis of choice warns against. The Callonian perspective on consumer empowerment advanced above highlights one particular way choice promotion may be empowering. It suggests that choice promotion cannot free consumers from their dependence on other actors, but it can make available calculative resources and calculative power that allow consumers to acquire a greater degree of autonomy in choice-making.

6.7.1 A New Perspective on How Choice Empowers Consumers

This argument challenges some of the key assumptions of the dominant perspectives on empowerment-through-choice. First, the argument stresses that choice is a systemic phenomenon and not the result of individual decision-making, as for example the choice-as-political-participation perspective and, at least partly, the choice-as-decision-making perspective suggest. Giving consumers choice does not simply amount to giving them individual freedom. This means that it is too simplistic to think of consumer empowerment as the mere provisioning of choice.

The Callonian perspective holds that the systemic production of choice includes the design of what the choice-as-decision-making perspective calls 'choice architectures' (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009) but also the creation of knowledge structures. Choices are not simply influenced by the way products are presented in choice situations but also how they are 'qualified' through qualification work (e.g., developing knowledge about food freshness by researching its link to health and taste and devising measurement systems that capture freshness).

The Callonian perspective disagrees with the perspective of choice-as-moral-governance over how to react to this deep 'constructedness' of choice. Where the choice-as-moral-governance perspective mainly focuses on how choice constructors (e.g., companies and policymakers) mobilize choice to control and disempower consumers (Beckett, 2012; Coll, 2013; Yngfalk, 2016), the Callonian perspective provides a framework for understanding how choice may be constructed to empower consumers. It does so by shifting attention from treating choice as a means to treating it as a process, making it possible to better locate the role of the consumer within this process. The Callonian perspective particularly zeroes in on the practice of calculation and reveals how consumers may take on an active role in defining their choices if they are united with the right calculative devices as their allies. Allies strengthen consumers' calculative power and their ability to choose autonomously if they 1) enable consumers to calculate the products to choose from in rich ways, 2) allow consumers to direct the temporal ordering of the processes of calculating, choosing, and purchasing, and 3) enable consumers to dispute the product classifications their calculative devices propose.

From this perspective of empowerment-through-choice, new questions emerge. We suggest that one particularly pressing avenue of research is the empowering potential of digital decision tools, such as price comparison sites or online user reviews, which are often thought to greatly improve consumers' choice-making abilities (Simonson & Rosen, 2014). To uncover what such tools, or calculative devices, mean for consumers' power position, we encourage scholars to attend to how the tools enrich or impoverish calculative spaces, how they temporally arrange calculative spaces, and to what extent they are open to dispute.

6.7.2 Calculative Power and Consumer Autonomy

Our conceptual discussion of the link between choice and consumer power holds important implications for how we understand the notion of consumer autonomy. Ultimately, calculative devices are empowering when they strengthen consumers' ability to make autonomous choices. However, the notion of autonomy implied here is different from how consumer autonomy is often conceived of. Consider for example Wertenbroch et al.'s (2020, p. 430) definition of autonomy as "consumers' ability to make and enact decisions on their own, free from external influences imposed by other agents". Clearly, the autonomy that arises from having calculative power is different. Consumers with calculative power are never "free from external influences" but rather owe their power to such influences. Their power stems from their calculative equipment – their allies in calculation. The Calloninan perspectives thus advances a notion of relational autonomy.

We see a similar notion of autonomy in Anker (2020), as he also stresses that certain forms of external influences are compatible with consumer autonomy. The Callonian perspective, however, focuses on dimensions of autonomy that Anker does not discuss. The most central difference is that Callon links autonomy to the ability to perceive options, which consumers acquire from their calculative equipment. Callon is thereby aligned with other scholars on autonomy who have noted the centrality of having “an adequate range of options” (Raz, 1988) for being able to make autonomous choices. A consumer is not simply autonomous if he or she is able to choose the products that satisfy his or her desires or if he or she is able to choose free from external influence. When we say that a consumer autonomous, “[w]e are saying that the person has the power to determine how she shall live” (Oshana, 1998, p. 82). Having the calculative resources to consider and compare a large but limited set of options is key to consumer autonomy.

6.8 References

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7 Discussion

I began this thesis by suggesting that CCT has overlooked important aspects of consumer culture, namely those aspects that relate to the cultural processes of constructing, conveying, and consuming product functionality. Levy (1959) was right when he said that consumers buy products for what they mean, but he did not seem to consider that many of the meanings of products relate to their functionality. Functional benefits – just like gender or class symbols (Levy, 1959) – are products of interpretation. Product functionality does not exist as a singular reality but is a cultural construction and should be studied as such in order to capture the many forms functionality may take. And it is this realization that makes the study of functionality relevant to CCT. To illustrate the promise of taking CCT down this route, this thesis set out to explore the cultures that construct 'facts' about products and thereby contribute to the constitution of their functionality. So, what does the thesis teach us about these 'cultures of consumer information'? Which areas of CCT research does the thesis help advance? And which new research directions does the thesis point CCT researchers towards?

7.1 Summary of Findings

Together, the three articles making up this thesis offers valuable insights into the questions that have guided this thesis. Returning to the point of departure of my explorations, Article 1 addresses how the ideologies underlying cultures of consumer information shape their knowledge creation practices. My comparative analysis of the ideological shaping of THINK and Amazon.com suggested that ideologies gain relevance for practices of knowledge creation by implying a set of assumptions that guide and legitimate particular ways of creating knowledge. I show that the reviewing practices that make up the cultures of THINK and Amazon.com differ in part because their underlying ideologies imply a difference within three different kinds of assumptions: axiological (i.e., assumptions about what values consumer information should serve), ontological (i.e., assumptions about the basic nature of market entities), and epistemological (i.e., assumptions about what can be known about market entities and how). This difference of assumptions is expressed in the cultures of Amazon.com and THINK as a divergence in how user reviews on Amazon.com and the expert reviews of THINK are constructed and, consequently, in how the reviews rate products.

Article 2 turns attention to how the ways cultures of consumer information enact ideologies change markets. Focusing on the organization of THINK, the article shows that the effect of consumer information on markets is linked to how cultures of consumer information translate ideologies (and the values they imply) into practices of constructing and communicating consumer information. The findings demonstrate that cultures of consumer information influence markets through establishing new procedures for testing the link between values and products (e.g., how can we measure the conformity of a car to the value of sustainability?) and devising new visual instruments that allow actors to identify strength of the values-product link (e.g., how can consumers evaluate the sustainability of a car in purchase situations?). Article 2 thereby finds that the epistemic practices of cultures of consumer information are indeed ‘market practices’ (Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2007), as they link up with practices of shopping, marketing communication, and product design to shape the organization of markets.

Both Article 1 and 2 establish that consumer information is contingent on the cultures in which it is created, thereby burying the assumption that consumer information can ever attain universal objectivity. Article 3 explores the implications of this finding for how consumer information can empower consumers through a conceptual discussion on the links between information, consumer choice, and power. The article concludes that the non-objectivity of information does not necessarily imply that we must abandon the project of empowering consumers by informing them about the characteristics of products. Instead of placing ‘objectivity’ as the prime criterion against which we hold information, the article suggests the empowering potential of information is to be judged from the degree to which the information provides consumers with ‘discretion’ in their consumption choices, as such information strengthens consumers’ autonomy. Cultures of consumer information can thus empower consumers when they expand rather than limit the programs of action open to consumers.

I summarize the main findings from the three articles in the table below, providing an overview of how they each advance our knowledge of cultures of consumer information.

Table 5 Overview of how the articles advance our knowledge of cultures of consumer information

	Research question	**Contribution to our understanding of cultures of consumer information**	**Publication status**
Article 1	How does ideology shape product reviews?	The article shows that ideology shapes the axiological, ontological, and epistemological assumptions that governs the knowledge practices of cultures of consumer information	An earlier version has been presented at the 2021 ACR conference. The manuscript is expected to be submitted to the Journal of Marketing within 3 months.
Article 2	How do consumer watchdog organizations change markets?	The article shows that cultures of consumer information can change markets by wielding their knowledge practices to shape the procedures by which market entities are valorized and the devices by which market actors are enabled to act in accordance with the values that matter to them	Published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.
Article 3	How can information empower consumers' choices?	The article argues that cultures of consumer information can empower consumers by granting them more discretion (i.e., the power to choose between lines of action). To do so, consumer information must strive towards three principles: 1) enriching consumers' opportunity to classify products, 2) enabling consumers to choose the moment of choice, and 3) making product classifications open to dispute.	A manuscript has been submitted to the 2023 CCT Conference.

7.2 Theoretical Implications

7.2.1 A New Look at Classical CCT Concerns

The overarching ambition guiding this thesis was to break new ground in CCT and seek to more firmly establish product functionality and the role of functional benefits in consumer culture as a fruitful area of research for CCT scholarship. My strategy for lifting this task was to point towards the construction of consumer information, seeing that this is a central process of defining the functionality and functional value of products and, at the same time, a palpably cultural process. This thesis demonstrates that the cultural study of functionality holds promise to illuminate new paths to be tread into theoretical domains of central concern to CCT scholars.

The findings of the thesis for example show how the study of cultures of consumer information enriches our understanding of the role of ideology in shaping markets, an issue that has long figured high on the CCT research agenda (e.g., Crockett & Wallendorf, 2004; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007). Article 1 shows how product reviews, often thought of as mundane buying advice, may very well be mundane but nonetheless work in subtle ways to advance ideologies. Looking for ideology in the way that functionality is defined in contemporary markets provides a new lens for exploring the complex ideological shaping of markets.

A cultural perspective on product functionality also reveals new dimensions of consumer activism, another staple of CCT research (e.g., Giesler, 2008; Gollnhofer et al., 2019; Handelman & Fischer, 2018; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Weijo et al., 2018). As Article 2 shows, it is fruitful to think of certain activist groupings as cultures of consumer information, as this perspective reveals how they seek to intervene in markets through the creation of knowledge about the functional value of products. Article 2 identified consumer watchdog organizations (CWOs) as a particular actor of consumer activism whose primary forms of activist engagement cannot be adequately explained without attending to how it participates in the politics of constructing functionality.

Finally, attending to the cultural construction of product functionality enables us to renew the discussion on consumer empowerment (e.g., Denegri-Knott et al., 2006; Papaoikonomou & Alarcón, 2017; Shankar et al., 2006; Shaw et al., 2006). Article 3 shows that how product functionality is constructed holds implications for the power position of consumers. It argues that while consumer information may be involved in constructing consumers, thus perpetuating consumer society and in this sense keeping consumers trapped in an arguably exploitative system, the empowering potential of consumer information still deserves attention because not all types of consumer information is equal. Some forms of consumer information provide consumers with more ample opportunity for 'choosing one's choice' than others. But we will never be able to discern the empowering potential of different forms of information if we cannot look beyond how information locks consumers into certain subject positions. We must look at the ways information equips actors for different routes of reflexivity and programs of action to be able to assess the empowering and disempowering effects of the information.

7.2.2 Epistemic Cultures and Knowledge Creation Dynamics in Markets

While this thesis has grown from the observation that CCT has hesitated to study how knowledge about the functional benefits of products is created, I do not wish to give the impression that CCT research has been unconcerned with processes of knowledge creation more generally. Indeed, much CCT research points, although most often indirectly, towards the great importance of knowledge creation for the shaping of markets. Below, I suggest how introducing the notions of 'epistemic cultures' and 'cultures of consumer information' can extend this line of research.

When CCT has been most directly concerned with knowledge creation, it has focused on the creation of knowledge about consumers or markets, either in the form of managerial market research (Arnould & Cayla, 2015; Bjerrisgaard & Kjeldgaard, 2013, 2020) or marketing scholarship (Fitchett et al., 2014; Hirschman, 1993). The notion of cultures of consumer information add to this literature by turning attention to knowledge about products, providing a theoretical framework for analyzing the cultural processes that generate the facts that consumers often consider when making purchasing choices.

While this thesis diverges from the extant CCT literature on knowledge creation in its focus on product knowledge, there are also similarities. The most striking similarity is the concern with the ideological underpinnings of knowledge. Both the thesis and much CCT literature are based on Foucault's

(1991) insight that knowledge is always ideological: it is made possible by and promotes certain normative assumptions about the world. However, despite sharing this perspective on knowledge with CCT, my thesis offers new ways of studying and understanding the link between ideology and knowledge and how this link matters for the shaping of markets. I note two tendencies in the extant CCT research on knowledge creation, against which the contribution of this thesis stands out.

First, most CCT studies exploring the links between ideologies and knowledge are interested in the ideological *effects* of knowldge. Yngfalk's (2016) study of how date labels advance neoliberalism is a good example. So are Giesler and Veresiu's (2014) study of how expert knowledge 'authorizes' certain subject positions, granting them moral legitimacy, and the similar albeit more critical argument found in Carrington et al.'s (2016, p. 30) discussion of how research on ethical marketing advances the ideology of neoliberalism by "reproduc[ing] the illusion of the consumer as a sovereign actor with the power and responsibility to change the system (and the world!) through ethical consumption choices". I could also mention Veresiu and Giesler's (2018) study of how market research produces knowledge that advances an ideology of neoliberal multiculturalism and contributes to the realization of ethnic consumer subjects. While these studies have taught us much about how knowledge entails ideological effects (most centrally, the creation of specific consumer subjects), they have had little to say on how ideology partakes in the construction of knowledge and how knowledge thus gains the capacity for ideological effects. As this thesis demonstrates, we must look at the epistemic cultures that construct knowledge to understand how ideology gets 'baked into' knowledge claims. Only this way can we understand how knowledge – whether figuring as consumer information, market reports, or marketing scholarship – channels the influence of ideologies on the ordering of markets.

The second tendency of CCT research on knowledge and ideology is that it rarely treats knowledge as an *epistemic* outcome, by which I mean an outcome of a process guided by epistemic principles (e.g., axiological, ontological, and epistemological ones). Instead, constructing knowledge is often treated as a myth-making process, an act of storytelling. In his study of natural health ads, Thompson (2004) for example notes how the information contained in ads serve to envelop the advertised product in a myth, which creates certain perceptions of the product. Humphreys and Thompson (2014) treat reports of the lasting environmental effects of oil spills as 'countermemories', that is, marginalized myths that may unsettle the dominant myths of markets. Likewise, Giesler and Veresiu (2014) note how expert knowledge is a resource for myth-making in that it legitimates the protagonists of the myths. By focusing on knowledge as part of a myth-making process, these studies tend to treat knowledge as a narrative resource that can be molded, much like any other 'story', and mobilized for various ideological agendas. We add to this perspective by approaching knowledge as the accomplishment of epistemic cultures and, as such, as being bounded and grounded by assumptions about axiology, ontology, and epistemology. Looking at knowledge through the prism of epistemic cultures means taking seriously that, yes, knowledge is a particular kind of 'story' about how the world works and hangs together and, yes, this story may be flexible and can take many forms. But, at the same time, it is less flexible than many other kinds of stories, such as myths whose "ideological effect works through the magical elision of facts and ideals" (Holt, 2006, p. 359). My thesis shows that to understand why knowledge takes the shape that it does, we must attend to how ideologies are translated into axiological, methodological, and ontological assumptions and concrete epistemic practices. Thus grounding the ideological influence of knowledge in the practices of epistemic cultures equips us to more precisely explain how knowledge is and can be mobilized to bring markets into alignment with particular ideologies.

7.2.3 Beyond the Objectivity of Consumer Information

This thesis is not only relevant to CCT work but also holds important implications for study of product reviews, which has attracted the interest of scholars from various marketing subdisciplines. The discussion has so far often revolved around uncovering the distortions different types of product reviews suffer from and thus identify the most 'objective' type of review (de Langhe et al., 2016b; Kozinets, 2016; Simonson, 2016; Winer & Fader, 2016). My findings clearly demonstrate that it is difficult to compare different types of reviews against universal criteria of objectivity. The comparison of THINK and Amazon.com, for example, showed that expert reviews and online user reviews do not offer the same kind of information. While Amazon.com's star rating is a measure of how likely consumers are to be satisfied with a product, THINK's product tests are designed to inform consumers of the comparative performance of products in strictly functionality-based dimensions. Given that they are designed towards constructing different *kinds* of knowledge, it is not appropriate to evaluate their 'objectivity' according to a common set of criteria for what counts as the 'truth'. Tellingly, the creators of the two different kinds of reviews also themselves appeal to divergent criteria for justifying their reviews. The first THINK editor, the Danish social critic Poul Henningsen, captured this relativity of objectivity better than anyone when he in one of the first issues of THINK quipped that "[o]bjectivity is something one feels the others are missing" (1964(7), 31). The implication of this view is that the 'truth value' of a review should always be considered within the context of the epistemic culture that produced it. For example, it is not very fruitful to criticize a review on Amazon.com on the grounds that it does not adhere to the principle of scientific rigor, as the legitimacy of the Amazon review is grounded in the very fact that it is produced by a normal consumer and not some scientist in a lab.

However, even if relativizing objectivity enables us to reorient and thereby continue the discussion on the truth value of different product reviews, I suggest that it may be more fruitful to replace this discussion with a discussion of the *consequences* of defining objectivity one way or another. A key question, for example, when comparing the reviews of THINK with those of Amazon.com is: Who benefits from each type of review? What kind of market orders and power positions are likely to emerge from the Amazon reviews enjoying superior or equal legitimacy compared to the reviews of THINK? As an example of what insights that are likely to emerge from asking such questions, it is interesting to note that the rating on Amazon.com is designed to benefit companies that deliver 'value for money', as the epistemic culture of Amazon.com encourages the inclusion of price in the evaluation of products. By attending to the consequences of different versions of objectivity, we will be better able to recognize what is at stake when one version assumes legitimacy.

7.3 Practical Implications

7.3.1 Enhancing Consumer Choice Reflexivity

In an information environment where consumers acquire access to more and more sources of product quality information (e.g., new labels or smartphone apps) and where, at the same time, the quality claims of these sources diverge, consumers are faced with the challenge of figuring out which sources to listen to. Often, it is not clear *why* sources diverge and consumers therefore have limited opportunity for evaluating what source best first their informational preferences. This thesis provides a framework for reflecting on the relative informational benefits and downsides of different sources of information. By treating information sources as cultures of consumer information, I bring to light how product information is an outcome of a particular set of epistemic practices and thus make it easier to grasp, for example, what product dimensions particular types of information capture and what truth criteria the types of information rest on. My findings may for example make consumers wary of using Amazon.com reviews for comparing the functional value of products, as these reviews have not been produced for the purpose of comparing functionality. Likewise, the findings could alert consumers about too blindly trusting the functionality differences that the review of THINK bring out, as these reviews have been designed to highlight such differences. Making such matters more transparent means that consumers will have a stronger foundation for choosing which type of information to base their purchasing decisions on and how to use each type of information. In this way, the findings of this thesis have the potential to enhance consumers' calculative power (Article 3), because they make the processes by which cultures of consumer information qualify products more open to dispute.

7.3.2 Information Positioning in a Complex Information Environment

The complex information environment also poses a challenge to the companies providing and selling information. Where THINK, for example, once held a near-monopolistic position as the sole provider of third-party product information, they today have several competitors, including Amazon.com, which challenge their main source of income: selling access to the results from their product tests. In this environment, it has become increasingly important for actors relying on selling product information to stress how they information is epistemically superior to the information available through other sources. The findings of this thesis provide a framework for identifying how an information provider's epistemic practices differ from the epistemic practices of other companies. Such knowledge may enable information providers to more clearly articulate the arguments that could convince consumers to favor *their* informational offerings over the offerings of others.

7.3.3 Designing Information Environments

The perhaps most significant practical contribution of this thesis is to policymakers. Here, my findings offer a model for evaluating whether the current consumer information is harmonious with the kinds of market orders policymakers aspire to uphold. It is worth repeating the conclusions of Article 1 and 2 that epistemic cultures advance the market orders that lean towards their underlying ideologies. When consumers employ THINK's reviews for choosing products, their choices benefit producers that prioritize excellent performance in the product dimensions deemed most important for consumer welfare. The resulting market order is aligned with the ideology of THINK and its view of consumers as vulnerable, because the underlying ambition is to a risk-free market where consumers are protected from ever choosing a bad product.

Aware of the ideologies underlying epistemic cultures, policymakers may reflect on the market orders to emerge from the dominance of particular cultures in the informational landscape. Comparing Amazon and THINK, for example, policymakers may become aware that the growing importance of online user reviews ushers in an ideological belief in strong consumer rationality and an enlarged role of consumer satisfaction in the market-level qualification of products. This realization may provoke reflection on whether the dimensions of products that policymakers find most important are being considered to the extent that they should in how the dominant epistemic cultures qualify products.

There may also be concerns regarding letting organizations like THINK take too dominant a position in the consumer information environment. One notable ideological effect of the epistemic culture of THINK is that innovation may be slowed. As explained in Article 1, the emphasis on making products comparable means that THINK is reluctant to consider new features within product categories because these features, until they are normalized across the category, complicate testing products in a standardized way. This means that THINK often 'smooths over' product differences by not testing the performance of the novel features. The result of this approach is that innovative products are not rewarded because their innovativeness (i.e., the technological novelties of their products) is not factored into the product rating. By contrast, as the epistemic culture of Amazon is not oriented towards the comparability of product, the Amazon reviews do not reflect this tendency and will therefore to a greater extent reward products for their innovative features. In this way, Amazon is better suited than THINK for bringing about a market order where innovation is encouraged.

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8 Conclusion and Future Research Directions

In this thesis, I have argued that to more fully understand consumer culture, we should not take too seriously Levy's (1959, p. 118) assertion that "the consumer is not as functionally oriented as he used to be". Rather than moving the study of consumer culture away from functional benefits, as CCT has tended to do (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), we should move the study 'into' functional benefits – into the processes by which they emerge.

Doing just that, this thesis has zeroed in on cultures of consumer information, those collections of practices that construct what we usually recognize as the hard facts about the functionality of products. Hopefully, after reading the thesis, the reader will have learned a few things about this topic – about how cultures of consumer information work and what they mean for consumers. But even if the thesis has accomplished this, it represents no more than a point of departure for uncovering the role of cultures of consumer information in contemporary markets. There are, indeed, several questions that the thesis has left open for future studies to pursue.

8.1 The Role of Materiality in Cultures of Consumer Information

One line of questions relates to the role of materiality in cultures of consumer information. This thesis has focused on the more *reflexive* dimensions of such cultures, for example how product reviewers select product quality criteria, how they weigh criteria, or how they communicate product evaluations. I focused on these dimensions as they, upon my preliminary investigations, appeared fundamental for explaining why cultures of consumer information differ in their product evaluations. However, I was also aware that I, by focusing on the reflexive organization of cultures of consumer information, left certain dimensions of these cultures largely unattended. Most centrally, the material objects involved in the construction of consumer information warrants more attention than I have been able to give them. Material objects are candidates for further investigation, as a vast volume of research on practices has demonstrated how objects hold a fundamental role in organizing practices (Schatzki, 2010), including practices of knowledge creation (Callon, 1984; Latour, 1986, 2003; Latour & Woolgar, 1986). Some scholars even argue that objects co-constitute practices (Shove et al., 2012). This begs the question of how material objects partake in constituting the epistemic practices of cultures of consumer information. It would for example be interesting to explore how the development of new test technologies has reshaped the way THINK reviews products. What has the evolution of crash dummies for example meant for how THINK rates child car seats in crash tests? In the case of Amazon, a technology that stands out is the algorithm that processes that individual Amazon reviews and determines how they are featured on the webpage and factored into the overall star rating. Insights into the constitutive force of such non-human actors within cultures of consumer information would further shed light on why cultures of consumer information construct information the way they do.

8.2 How Consumers Navigate the Contemporary Information Environment

A second area of oversight of this thesis relates to how consumers use the information that cultures of consumer information produce. The interest in cultures of consumer information is partly premised on the assumption that these cultures compete to influence consumers' choices. For example, that consumers either choose to listen to THINK or to Amazon.com but not at the same time. If the assumption is right – if different cultures of consumer information *are* in competition – it becomes important to study how the dominant cultures construct information and qualify products because they get to drive consumers' choices. However, this assumption of competition is, indeed, an *assumption*, as the thesis has not explored how consumers actually navigate the current information environment. It is for example not unlikely that consumers integrate insights from THINK reviews and user reviews on Amazon.com whenever they are looking up information on the products they are considering to buy. Therefore, to further uncover the role of cultures of consumer information, we need a deeper understanding of how consumers understand and use different types of information.

I hope these shortcomings of the thesis are taken as opportunities for future research and that the thesis thereby results in more analytical engagement with the role of cultures of consumer information in contemporary markets. More generally, though, I hope to have encouraged consumer researchers to challenge perspectives that exclude questions of functionality from the study of consumer culture. My thesis has done this by studying the cultural construction of consumer information and has, in this way, suggested what is to be gained from taking a cultural approach to functionality-related aspects of consumption. At the same time, however, the thesis represents but a small step within the much larger project of freeing consumer research from the constraining dichotomy between functionality and culture. No one has articulated the work that lies ahead better than Cochoy (2008, p. 39), whose words I will invoke to conclude the thesis in the hope that doing so will help amplify their echo within consumer research and allow them to continue to inspire consumer researchers, just as they have inspired me:

> [T]he 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. All consumption aspects and entities belong to consumer phenomena and studies; they thus have to be reunited rather than separated. For every researcher involved in the field, this should be an opportunity to be taken, rather than a point to discuss.

8.3 References

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Titre de la thèse en français
Cultures de l'information du consommateur

Résumé *(1500 caractères max.)*

Cette thèse porte sur les collectifs qui produisent les informations consultées par le consommateur afin de décider quel produit acheter. Nous nommons ces collectifs, cultures de l'information du consommateur. Nous nous intéressons à ces cultures pour deux raisons. Premièrement, bien que des chercheurs en consommation avancent que les informations factuelles et la fonctionnalité d'un produit ne joue qu'un rôle limité dans la décision d'achat, la popularité des avis de consommateurs en ligne nous montre que les consommateurs recherchent des informations sur la fonctionnalité des produits avant de faire un achat. Deuxièmement, nous nous intéressons aux cultures de l'information du consommateur car connaître les modèles culturels de production de l'information peut nous aider à expliquer pourquoi différents types d'informations, tels que les avis d'experts ou de consommateurs, offrent souvent des informations différentes. La découverte des facteurs culturels qui font que les différents types d'avis divergent peut aider les consommateurs à prendre de meilleures décisions, les entreprises à mieux répondre à l'information et les décideurs à mieux gérer l'environnement actuel de l'information des consommateurs.

Mots clefs français : L'information du consommateur, la culture de consommation, l'avis de produits, consumer culture theory

Title

Cultures of Consumer Information

Abstract

This thesis is about the collectives that produce the functionality-related information consumers consult whenever they are considering what products to buy. I call these collectives cultures of consumer information. Cultures of consumer information warrant attention for two reasons. First, as the popularity of online consumer reviews suggests, consumers crave the 'facts' about the functionality of products before making a purchase, even if some consumer researchers have argued that functionality and facts only play a limited role in purchasing decisions. And second, cultures of consumer information call for attention because understanding the cultural patterns in how consumer information is produced can help us explain why different types of information, such as expert reviews and online user reviews, often offer contrasting characterizations of products. Uncovering the cultural factors that make different types of reviews diverge can help consumers to make better decisions, companies to better respond to consumer information, and policymakers to better manage the current consumer information environment.

Keywords : consumer information, consumer culture, product reviews, consumer culture theory

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