**Studying consumers? Recent social science interest in market research**  
Johan Nilsson, Linköping University, 2013

**Abstract**

STS scholars have come to increasingly study markets and their enactment. Cases have included traders making markets, and economists making economies. Market- and marketing researchers produce knowledge of market constituents – consumers – but have yet to become subject of longer study. This paper explores the space for the study of such researchers and their relation to consumers.

Based on a literature review of previous academic attention to consumers as objects of knowledge, particular interest is given to how the consumer has been characterized as knowable, in order to better understand the way in which market researchers produce knowledge about consumers. The paper argues that certain perspectives have come to dominate the study of market research, effectively focusing on market research as part of larger processes rather than an activity conducted by people.

The paper further concludes that attention to marketing, including market- and marketing research, is in need of approaches that recognize the parallel articulation of knowledge and action that structures the knowledge that flows within businesses: With contemporary marketing practice, incorporating consumers as stable and externally knowable (observable parts of ‘the market’), yet changing and reflecting (constituents of a malleable market), the means by which market researchers interpret their object of study (themselves being consumers) is centrally important.

As marketing and market making have come to receive more scholarly attention, there is room for an ethnographic parallel to ethnographies of marketing professionals (e.g. Marianne Lien’s *Marketing and Modernity*, 1997), with the alternate focus of market researchers. This paper outlines themes already formed within the social sciences to gage the room for such an endeavour, as part of a further PhD project connecting the study of markets, and marketing, as well as knowledge production.

**Keywords:** Marketing, Market research, Consumption, Knowledge production
Introduction

Market researchers are an interesting group of people. By using models and technologies eclectically collected from economic and psychological thought, they have gained licence to speak about, and for, ‘the consumer’ (e.g. Slater 2011). I am interested in how this entity comes to be, as an object of knowledge, and how market researchers act to generate it. This paper aims to prepare for ethnographic study by finding out what, and how much, the social scientific community knows about market researchers as a group of knowledge professionals. I will be exploring previous attention to these figures by others who have written about market research.

This paper sets out to characterise how market researchers have been studied. That prompts some explanation of terminology. I use the term ‘market researcher’ as well as ‘market research’ referring also to ‘marketing’ research and –researchers. These terms are commonly interchangeable in emic, and sometimes also in etic, use. The market researchers I am interested in are people who may have academic training, but produce commercial knowledge about markets and consumers, for paying clients, or their employers. They feature as a form of marketing professional rather than the academic researchers whose articles I assess. That said, these distinctions collapse when market researchers write academic papers (Schwarzkopf 2009; Sunderland & Denny 2011) and I believe that it is best not to assume their separation.¹

¹Indeed, for the purpose of future study of market researchers, the fragility of this distinction between different kinds of researcher is too analytically rich to be overlooked.
Articles about market researchers in academic journals have been sought in a number of databases, with the gathered articles analysed in terms of how market researchers and their work have been explored by scholars. I have limited the scope of my enquiry from the broader study of market research that focuses purely on the efficiency of particular techniques and activities (as found in trade-oriented journals, e.g. *Journal of Marketing*, *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, and Schwarzkopf 2009).

The opening of markets as a black box has already been performed: Market-making has become its own branch of study within STS (see Callon 1998; Kjellberg & Helgesson 2006), as has marketing practice (Lien 1997; Zwick & Cayla 2011). Additionally, market research, specifically, has received some attention from an STS perspective (Dubuisson-Quellier 2010; Lezaun 2007). What now needs to be established to further my study of what consumers are to market research and marketing, is a better picture of the state of study surrounding market research: What are other scholars interested in? In which ways is market research unboxed? What stays boxed?

**Research questions**

In order to bring understanding of how to go about studying market research from a social scientific perspective, the following questions are posed to the material, aiming to give an overview of what kind of knowledge of market research there is.²

² This text orients most centrally around the second of the questions, which calls for the most and most crucial analysis. The first question is more bibliographically oriented, and the third relies on the second, calling for some theoretical focus.
• What is the corpus of contemporary social knowledge on market research like? How collected is it?

• What aspects of market research have received interest by the social science scholars? Have scholars approached market research as a field consisting of people and devices? As a set of practices? As a tool?

• Have particular ideas been applied? Which are they?

**Method**

This paper is a literature review, aiming towards distinguishing the object of study - market research. The research material consisted of a formally collected literature sample on the topic of market research and researchers. This was done in order to get a rich and varied set of perspectives on the study of market research from the academic disciplines around which my own work orients. The sample was collected through database searches of a range of well-established publications chosen to be primarily relevant within the academic fields sociology, STS, and anthropology which is my own academic area of study. The search relied heavily on the keywords “market researcher” and “marketing researcher”, as these terms approach market research as an activity conducted by actors (researchers). Additionally “market research” and “marketing research” were a measure to safeguard against articles being needlessly neglected. After identifying relevant periodicals, the sample was collected through first searching selected SAGE publications and JSTOR’s collection of anthropology and sociology, and additionally by looking more broadly for “market researcher” or “marketing researcher” in Web of Knowledge, SAGE, JSTOR and Scopus, resulting in a relatively short range of relevant hits. Dates were not applied as a criteria for the initial search (SAGE and JSTOR)
but the second, wider range of searches had to be limited to covering the period from the year 2000 and onwards. The review then went by an extensive reading of abstracts, paired with a contextualization of how the market research-oriented keywords appeared in text. Low-relevance texts, meaning that use of the terms were incidental, or not actively engaged with, were dismissed from the analysed set. Out of the full sample of around 200, 9 articles are discussed as research material in the upcoming section of this paper. To a surprising degree, market research functions simply as a source of knowledge throughout the journals: either the term features as a listed reference or it is alluded to in order to establish some fact mentioned in passing. Judging from major peer-reviewed articles, few scholars take an interest in the study of market research. This tendency is clearest within non-trade academia: anthropology, sociology and STS pay little attention to market research as a phenomenon. In marketing journals market research received rich attention, but in terms of specific techniques and their merit: Material about market researchers falls outside of the scope of such publications. Using wide search criteria, and range of sources, only a rather short number of texts about market research as an activity conducted by people were to be found within these mainstream journal articles.

**Analysing Research on researchers**

Market research is not an object of knowledge without ambiguity. In fact, it can be approached according to a wide range of interest, and different perspectives distinguish this object in a number of ways. This says as much about the multi-faceted nature of

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3 The article searches were conducted February 14th 2013, and March 12th 2013, respectively.
market research, as it does of the multiple branches of social knowledge making. As this paper explores social scientific interest in market research, taking account of this recursivity is important. The study of knowledge making is the purview of STS, with scientists’ rendering of the world as a central object of knowledge. For instance, Knorr Cetina (1999) has written about scientists, utilising perspectives from anthropology and sociology, ultimately speaking of groups of scientists as heterogeneous ‘epistemic cultures’ rather than a collected homogenous community. Another scholar, historian Lorraine Daston has used 'moral economy' to assess scientific culture (Daston 1995). According to Daston, a moral economy is a web of values: moral in that it is normative and instils some affect in people, and economic in structure as the network of norms is stable, benefiting some phenomena and clashing with others. That is, they encourage certain ways of being and doing (Daston 1995: 4). While STS would have traditionally focused on the knowledge making of the natural sciences, the social sciences have received particular attention by Camic, Gross, and Lamont (2011). Their notion of social knowledge includes “descriptive information and analytical statements”, normative judgement and recommendation, as well as “cognitive schemata” and theoretical models (Camic, Gross & Lamont 2011: 3). This characterization is useful, as it does not divide scientific interest and approach into neat categories of theory, method, empirics, etc. Instead it allows us to look at social knowledge as a cultural whole.

This paper sets out from this understanding of social scientific thought as fragmented, and overlapping in terms of interest: There are multiple perspectives and understandings that simultaneously contribute to the corpus of social knowledge on market research. The empirical material for this essay is peer-reviewed academic articles, and to what extent (and in what form) another (non-academic) class of
researchers are given attention, by social knowledge makers of the social sciences. The study follows one centrally important product: the academic journal. This artefact is social knowledge made transferable between researchers across the world, in a common format (for thought on the role of transferable assemblages in establishing successful networks, see for example Latour 2005: 223). This tool of my researchers’, is a way to engage with their work, which in turn entails the tools of market research: Articles written by social scientists is my source for understanding their research interests, allowing me to access the overarching themes and perspectives in market researchers as objects of knowledge for social knowledge makers.
## Overview of articles

### Figure 1: summary table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Year of publication</th>
<th>Journal of publication</th>
<th>Inter-referencing</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Questions asked market research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From Counterculture to Consumer Culture: Vespa and the Italian youth market, 1958–78</td>
<td>Arvidsson, Adam</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Journal of Consumer Culture</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>The identification of a market for Vespas in 1960s Italy</td>
<td>How is market research complicit in the generation of consumers to fit advertisers' needs for manageable, diverse market segments?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currencies of Commercial Exchange: Advertising agencies and the promotional imperative</td>
<td>Cronin, Anne M.</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Journal of Consumer Culture</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Strategic use and understanding of data among advertisers</td>
<td>How does data fit its use? How does information about consumers function as part of a moral economy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumers and Consumption</td>
<td>Sharon, Zukin; Maguire, Jennifer Smith</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Annual Review of Sociology</td>
<td>Cronin 2004</td>
<td>Outline of social scientific attention to consumption</td>
<td>How has consumption come to be understudied by social science, market research having been left with consumers?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention to 'Details': Etiquette and the Pharmaceutical Salesman in Postwar American</td>
<td>Greene, Jeremy A.</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Social Studies of Science</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Sales technique for pharmaceutical salesmen</td>
<td>How have market research techniques permeated sales practice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brands: A critical perspective</td>
<td>Arvidsson, Adam</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Journal of Consumer Culture</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Marxist analysis of brand value</td>
<td>How does research fit into brand management?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing Comes Between Me and My CPU: Smart Clothes and 'Ubiquitous' Computing</td>
<td>Andrejevic, Mark</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Theory, Culture &amp; Society</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>New consumer items gathering data</td>
<td>Market research is mentioned as a field that will use new availability of information. How are consumers being recorded and watched by new technologies?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting Consumers to Work: 'Co-creation' and new marketing governmentality</td>
<td>Zwick, Detlev; Bonsu, Samuel K. &amp; Darmody, Aron</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Journal of Consumer Culture</td>
<td>Arvidsson 2001</td>
<td>Marketing discourse of co-creation</td>
<td>Market research part of different ways of seeing consumer, and the value they create</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing Customers: The database as new means of production</td>
<td>Zwick, Detlev &amp; Denegri Knott, Janice</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Journal of Consumer Culture</td>
<td>Arvidsson 2005</td>
<td>Databases as managing consumers</td>
<td>What kind of value is created by consumer data? How does it fit into the distinction between consumer and producer?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Article summaries in brief

Adam Arvidsson's "From Counterculture to Consumer Culture" (2001) explores 1960s Italian Vespa advertising. Arvidsson discusses how the advertisers involved in marketing the scooter constructed a certain type of new target market: that of the hedonist and self-expressing consumer. This consumer was ascribed traits that were in line with the advertisers ideas of manageable consumers, rather than simply representing the attitudes and preferences of contemporary young Italians. Also noted is the tendency within marketing thought to look for and identify diversity in markets (Arvidsson 2001: 58).

In “Currencies of Commercial Exchange: Advertising agencies and the promotional imperative” (2004) Anne Cronin writes about the use and valuation of testing and consumer data. Rather than the process of making knowledge, or of the people involved, she has made a study of the exchanges between advertisers and their clients. In her account advertisers use data outlining the efficiency of their campaigns to manage clients’ beliefs in the efficiency of their work. Cronin’s focus is on strategic use and interpretation of data (Cronin 2004: 345) instead of its generation.

“Attention to ‘Details’: Etiquette and the Pharmaceutical Salesman in Postwar American” (2004) is an article by Jeremy Greene that discusses the introduction and eventual permeation of market research within the business of pharmaceutical sales. The article’s focus is the maintenance of professionalism in the sales (Greene 2004: 276) and market research is only a minor point within the larger narrative. Greene deals with the introduction of market research thought and -methods for the detail men to better sell to their clients: medical doctors (Greene 2004: 283-284).
The 2004 article “Consumer and Consumption” sees Zukin and Smith Maguire give an outline of the social study of consumers and consumption (2004). In their account, production of consumer desire is central, as is the noted tendency to overlook consumption in early social thought, leaving this phenomenon to marketers (Ibid: 175; 183). The article discusses different renderings of consumers and the early development of methods and perspectives on consumer needs (established in the 1950s-60s), then 1960s-90s lifestyle focus to desire, which has remained in later brand management (Ibid. 183-184).

“Nothing Comes Between Me and My CPU” (Andrejevic 2005) is an article that is about the spread of new information-gathering devices in smart clothing. In covering the massive information collecting made possible and responsive, a world where everything is done can be noted and sorted, perfection of market research and personalisation of consumer experience is the ominous promise (Andrejevic 2005: 109).

In “Brands: A critical perspective”, Arvidsson (2005) focuses on consumers as producers of value. Experimenting with applying a Marxist perspective on brands Arvidsson notes that traditional Marxism clearly demarcated production form circulation (Arvidsson 2005: 240). In a world revolving around principles of marketing, this distinction lacks relevance, as consumers take part in production of brand value: Brands and their value are not only produced by brand managers and advertisers’ agency. When managed well by marketers, consumers’ value production is harnessed and consumers are engaged in immaterial labour (Arvidsson 2005: 249).
The article “Putting Consumers to Work: ‘Co-creation’ and new marketing governmentality” (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody 2008) tells about the introduction of a new marketing idea – fleeting and in-charge consumers envisioned as an opportunity for savvy marketers (Ibid: 164). These fast moving consumers are conceived of as co-creators of brand value (Ibid: 166). More importantly, the rendering domesticates consumers by transforming them into partners in a mutual innovation/production process.

The notion of consumers as commodities returns yet again in “Manufacturing Customers: The database as new means of production” (Zwick and Knott 2009). The article deals with how customer databases are managing consumers. By harnessing their potential value as sources of information, customer databases and their contents may become commodities: useful for market insight projects, market research and marketing (Zwick & Knott 2009: 221).

A further step towards market research as ambivalent in terms of its role as finding out, versus generating, “New Algorithmic Identity” (Cheney-Lippold 2011) notes the use of analytic algorithms. Specifically, Cheney-Lippold focuses on how algorithms are used to assign gender to visitors of a website, based on the users’ Internet browsing history.

The articles’ context
The nine articles that have been given the role of material for this literary overview have been selected from a large sample: They were the articles that clearly dealt with market research practice or practitioners. This means that they do not only exemplify the range
of interests in market researchers. They also represent it, as my attempt to aggregate the content of the databases. The following discussion aims to summarize the articles in terms of content, context, and direction. It should be mentioned that the short number of texts included is clearly indicative of the relative lack of attention to market research as societal phenomenon, activity or vocation. Many of the dismissed texts that mentioned the term (and thus ended up as hits in the search) would cite market research for information but not cover the subject, or would look to develop certain research techniques, as in the case of trade-oriented publications. Marketing journals do not question the market research to a very large extent, but focus on further developing and improving its workings. Scholars from the social sciences often study what market research means as a whole, speaking of its effects on society or its parts, and seldom go into discussing this in terms of processes or market researchers themselves.

While there are interactions within the material it does not constitute a collected discourse. Many of the texts are from the Journal of Consumer Culture, oriented around consumer culture theory (for an outline of this field, see Arnould & Thompson 2005). “Consumers and Consumption” is an overview of social studies into consumption and was published in a sociological journal (Annual Review of Sociology): it deals with knowledge of consumption rather than market research. The remaining three articles are all from STS-oriented publications (Social Studies of Science and Theory, Culture & Society). There are some discussions between the scholars, in the form of referencing: Zukin & Maguire reference Cronin’s article, and both articles co-authored by Zwick reference Arvidsson. It is also important to mention that Zwick as well as Arvidsson feature as authors in multiple texts. It would appear too strong to claim that there is a collected discussion at play here. Rather, the scholarly interaction appears to revolve
around market research as an activity, Arvidsson and Cronin having written relevant articles on the subject, with references outside of the selection (marketing studies, social science theorists, etc.) dominating.
Figure 2: Different article perspectives on market research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Year of publication</th>
<th>Focus on what market research does</th>
<th>Focus on doing market research</th>
<th>Focus on those that do market research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From Counterculture to Consumer Culture: Vespa and the Italian youth market, 1958–78</td>
<td>Arvidsson, Adam</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Market research is part of manufacturing market segment for scooters. Process is not given much detail.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currencies of Commercial Exchange: Advertising agencies and the promotional imperative</td>
<td>Cronin, Anne M.</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Market research is a factor in the negotiations between advertisers and their clients. Advertisers worry about the validity and reliability of testing ads.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumers and Consumption</td>
<td>Sharon, Zukin; Maguire, Jennifer Smith</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Yes, market research is discussed as the dominant arena for consumption research, rather than appropriate interest within the social sciences.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention to 'Details': Etiquette and the Pharmaceutical Salesman in Postwar American</td>
<td>Greene, Jeremy A.</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>The growth of market research techniques within sales practice receives attention.</td>
<td>Some data collection techniques receive mention.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brands: A critical perspective</td>
<td>Arvidsson, Adam</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Marketing research part of managing consumers.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing Comes Between Me and My CPU: Smart Clothes and 'Ubiquitous' Computing</td>
<td>Andrejevic, Mark</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Market research as part of the increased possibility of surveillance and personalization of the consumer experience</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting Consumers to Work: 'Co-creation' and new marketing governmentality</td>
<td>Zwick, Detlev; Bonsu, Samuel K. &amp; Darmody, Aron</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Marketing research part of managing consumers.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing Customers: The database as new means of production</td>
<td>Zwick, Detlev &amp; Denegri Knott, Janice</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Market research as important part of discussion on database marketing manufacturing customers.</td>
<td>Better knowledge of consumers offering new opportunities for profit. Constant reconstruction of the object of knowledge, by the practice of knowledge.</td>
<td>No, but researchers are quoted commenting their work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A New Algorithmic Identity: Soft Biopolitics and the Modulation of Control</td>
<td>Cheney-Lippold, John</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>To some extent market research and marketing are discussed as playing part in categorising people.</td>
<td>The considerations of algorithmic categorization discussed, as is the role of interest in the determination of what sort of differences that are used to categorize.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Perspectives**

For the purpose of this paper, it is useful to see market research as discussed in three different ways (see figure 2, above). The first case is when market research’s role is discussed, as an entity that relates to others: what it does. An example would be early texts of the 1950s and ‘60s where the role of market research and its contribution to
society is focused upon (e.g. Bogart 1952; 1963; Woodward 1951). This perspective is
evident in many of the articles featuring in my selection: Zukin and Maguire 2004,
Lippold 2011 all take interest in fitting in market research at large into other societal
processes. The second way of focusing on market research covers interest in its
workings as a process: how is it does things. This is common in articles written from a
trade perspective, but often only in terms of efficiency rather than in terms of seeing it
as professional practice. It is also done with a perspective seeking to understand these
processes from a social scientific standpoint in Arvidsson 2001, Cronin 2004, Zwick &
Denegri 2009, and Cheney-Lippold 2011. The third focus is that of the personal
perspective on the market researcher: those doing the research. This is the interest in
market researchers as people. It could be argued that this taxonomy is on a scale of
abstraction, with position being more aggregated, and processes and persons less
removed. Whether this is the case or not is not in focus in this essay (I rather doubt it)
but there is a marked slant towards discussing the position and workings of market
research as a reified object, rather than focusing on its processes and practitioners
within my material. Going back to thinking with Daston here, it could be argued that
social scientists studying market research have focused on the use of such knowledge to
further other areas of enquiry, such as making statements about society at large,
capitalism, or consumption, and that the work process (and the workers) has been
deemed less central. Judging from the articles, it appears that market researchers as
actual people have received little attention, and that market research is thought of more
as a practice or as part of a marketing regime.
Understandings within the articles

Making sense of the social knowledge about market researchers extends beyond the perspectives on market research outlined above. There are also other understandings, including theories related to, and choice of, empirical focus (where one relates to the other). When specifically dealing with theoretical frameworks, most of the articles relate to the workings of Michel Foucault and Karl Marx. These thinkers are widely influential throughout the social sciences, and their inclusion, together with critical theorists such as Adorno, and consumption scholars such as De Certau and Miller, form canonical names for an interest in consumption in general. What is in focus in the different articles, and how they relate to the theories they espouse varies however: This essay will focus on three overarching understandings: surveillance, the managing of consumers, and ambiguity (see figure three, below). I believe that these three approaches are best understood as tendencies of social knowledge (and as such including theoretical perspectives and empirical focus, see Camic, Gross & Lamont 2011). The understandings are additionally useful as a means to characterize the spectrum of realist and constructivist attention across the articles, with surveillance on the realist end, ambiguity on the constructivist, and managing in between. To this notion of understandings as forming a spectrum, several of the texts are also rich enough to merit mention in more than one category.
Surveillance

An important theoretical tangent among those interested in the role of market research, be they critical or insiders, is thinking of market research in a realist fashion: market research knowledge reflects reality. Consumers are out there, and intense study of consumers is the surveillance of actual people. Andrejevic’s account of increased data gathering opportunities in wearable computing is a text exemplifying the thought of market research as surveillance. In this case, it means consumer objects gaining the power to communicate and act to gather information about their wearers. Andrejevic
also notes the introduction of neuromarketing: consumers may be known by observing their brains, rather than desires, attitudes, or other expressions (Andrejevic 2005: 113).

The surveillance perspective is not only evident in critical accounts, such as the Adorno-oriented critique of Andrejevic: The idea that market research watches consumers existing out there in some natural state is espoused by insider scholars from early market research and onwards. Indeed, champions and critics of market research share the general idea that such research is a primarily observing activity. One could draw on champions of market research for perspective here: For instance, when Julian L. Woodward (1951) tells the history of his future, he foresees a world where market research and polling would permeate the wondrous 1970s. Aided by fantastic computing machinery, and consensus on issues of sampling and psychological characterization, pollsters and researchers would rise to be the primary interpreters of society’s priorities. When public attitudes were easily available with maximum reliability, democracy’s very workings would be greatly improved (Woodward 1951: 407-8; 410; 413). Woodward’s account of the future of public opinion research can be read as amusing retro-futurism. More importantly, however, Woodward was partly right about the rise to prominence of market research, and he shares the idea of what market researchers do with his critics (including Andrejevic, but see also consumption critics such as Baumann 2007). This realist assumption of market research’s relationship to surveyed consumers is challenged in later texts, such as Cheney-Lippold 2011. The article notes the marketing/market research disposition for distinguishing consumers into different categories in order to understand them. It is noted that with enhanced computer technologies databases are becoming a way of understanding intentions (Cheney-Lippold 2011: 168). The article claims to use a surveillance framework for
understanding market research, but argues that this type of surveillance is different from the way the term tends to be used for other societal phenomena. Marketing surveillance is sorting in terms of category rather than of persons (Cheney-Lippold 2011: 176). In effect, Cheney-Lippold's notion of surveillance goes beyond Andrejevic and Woodward's, into the territory of managing consumers, as well as the ambiguity of representation.

**Managing consumers**
The managerial perspective ties in with the understanding of market research as closely associated with marketing and its need to distinguish and diversify market segments, but also with understanding the shifting face of capitalist society. The relationship between market research and marketing is stressed, and the difference between controlling, generating, and mirroring, blur. “Brands” (Arvidsson 2005) utilizes a Marxian perspective noting that the marketing notion of brand management is a process of appropriating value. Consumers take part in production of brand value, which means that this value is not only produced by brand managers and advertisers’ agency. When managed well by marketers, consumers’ value production is harnessed and consumers are engaged in immaterial labour (Arvidsson 2005: 249). Arvidsson ties this in with market research indirectly in his outline of the place of marketing thought and consumers within contemporary market structures: In Arvidsson’s account, with brand managers as central figures, it is an instrumental kind of market research that is evident, one that is a tool for managing and appropriating values of cool, etc. produced by consumers. (Arvidsson 2005: 250). A similar issue raised within Anne Cronin’s article on advertisers (2004), is the uncertainty of measuring in the relationship between managing and measuring: When her informants talk of the data supposedly dealing with
the quality of their work, they return to the indeterminacy of measuring impact and effect of advertising. The local knowledge is indeed that good advertising is something entirely separate from the established measurements (Cronin 2004: 347), and that the data is best used to make persuasive arguments rather than anything else.4

Greene views market research as a tool of managing ones customers by means of new techniques: Detail men benefited from incorporating increasingly complex marketing research into their work rather than relying on ad-hoc stereotyping, which was the previous norm (Greene 2004). Greene also spends some part of his article falling in with the general note of marketing and marketing research coming to rise to a more prominent position during the 1940s, and the salesmen themselves becoming part of the intelligence gathering system by the end of the 1950s (Greene 2004: 284).

Zwick et al. (2008) note that marketing has not been some stable ideology, spreading across the world, but rather that it is a shifting, and multi-faceted set of theories and practice. The 1940s saw consumer needs as more or less fixed – target for Fordist production, where the worry was to set relatively slow production to address consumer needs. With time, the authors note an increasing tendency to see consumers as more and more psychologically complex and fleeting. Early market research was a way to manage and pin down these traits (Ibid: 169). What has come to pass, according to the authors,

4 This doubt in testing also extends to the reliability of testing methods. Advertisers find that producing consumers to test is growing more difficult and that subjects are manipulated by the process (Cronin 2004: 348).
is that consumers have been rendered producers of profit. Managing consumers is no longer only about targeting them, but about domestication.

If the 2000s saw a perspective stressing how knowledge of the consumer comes in tandem with the marketing mix (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody 2008: 170), surveillance and discipline in consumer control (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody 2008: 185), Zwick et al. note that the more recent marketing concept of co-creation instead deals with consumers that are not only fast moving, and psychologically complex, but also value-creating – bridging the gap between production and consumption (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody 2008: 185). Similarly to Zwick et al 2008, Zwick & Knott (2009) notice the collapse of traditional distinctions.

More specifically, instead of flexibly adjusting production regimes to shifting consumption patterns, database marketers collapse the production-consumption dichotomy by manufacturing customers as commodities. (Zwick & Knott 2009: 221)

Not specifically about market research, but about the shift of consumer focus, and the value of information, the article criticizes earlier Foucauldian notions of consumers being simply controlled my marketing and market research. Instead it is a management of translation, where the consumer is given new traits. By focusing on the use, Cronin makes a similar point about market research. To advertisers, the notion of the fast-moving, complex and thus fleeting consumer is a powerful argument for buying advertising and brand management (Ibid 345; 345). A way to understand this is to compare it with observations made by Marianne Lien (Lien 2004) as she suggests that the consumer is a construct defined by its virtuality (Lien 2004: 16-17): With time, ‘the customer’ has given way to the more abstracted ‘consumer’ (Lien 1997: 110). During the
same period market research practices have interacted with social science, economics and business practice, and changed the way the world is conceived and dealt with (see Slater 2011: 32).

**Ambiguity of mirroring/producing**

Some of the authors in the material deal with the process of market research by noting the ambiguity of the representations of market research knowledge. This ambiguity regards whether measurement actions mirror the world, or take part in changing it. In Arvidsson’s narrative the strategic use of testing is described as techniques that acted to reimagine consumers as manageable in a post-Fordist world that was imagined by contemporary advertisers (Arvidsson 2001: 47-48). By identifying customers and directing their communication to them, advertisers ushered this world in.

In short, there was no clear-cut generational subjectivity ‘there’ to be appropriated. Rather, Leader’s [The advertising agency] creatives, driven by the ambition to diversify the market, manufactured one, putting together rather disparate elements of contemporary youth culture. The research technique that they employed, motivation research, played an important part in that process. (Arvidsson 2001: 58)

Arvidsson notes that rather than seeing market research as simply a way to find out more about consumers, what goes in is parallel articulation: a process where market objects are mirrored and created by research. As with Arvidsson (2001) Cronin (2004) claims that market research is a method to make consumers manageable. However, as an alternative to a discourse of governance and control, Cronin talks about market research and data as forming part of a political economy of truth between advertisers and their clients (Cronin 2004: 352). Consumer subjects are *made* in the generation and interpretation of data (Cronin 2004: 348). In Arvidsson’s discussion on brand value and
the reimagining of consumers he also notes the ambiguity of measurement. What can be seen is the tension between the insertions of branded goods in a valuable environment versus cool-hunting for external value to add. There is a dual position of marketers adapting to the market by placing the brand as-is within an already attractive setting, or to adapt the brand, to make it seamlessly fit a certain valuable social world (Arvidsson 2005: 248). The ambiguity of measuring/determining becomes central in "A New Algorithmic Identity" (Cheney-Lippold 2011): In analytics algorithms, does visitor or site decide gender when the weighing of the algorithm may shift according to either? The algorithmic identity becomes both more ephemeral and solid at the same time, Cheney-Lippold argues (Cheney-Lippold 2011: 170).

Algorithm ultimately exercises control over us by harnessing these forces through the creation of relationships between real-world surveillance data and machines capable of making statistically relevant inferences about what that data can mean. (Cheney-Lippold 2011: 179)

Cheney-Lippold connects this to wider workings of trying to gather knowledge about consumers by referring to a historical shift in research into composition of consumer audience, a shift from demographic to psychographic categorization (Cheney-Lippold 2011: 167). Given uncertainty of classificatory processes, the kinds of interest that direct them become the central fixture.

Conclusions

There are few published articles into market research that engage with the subject in a way that generates specific insights and tools for understanding such activity. The primary reason appears to be lack of scientific interest in this field, as related areas, such
as marketing and advertising are extensively researched and theorised. The studies that do deal with market research tend to focus on it as a reified entity: A perspective that assumes its specifics and boundaries, and deals with this black box in relation to other things, be they market, context, or society. If using the artefact analogy again, market research may be a tool, but a tool which is taken as is, rather than looking at its assembly. Studies that put market research processes in the centre will be the more interesting step forward as simplistic analysis of consumerist society (e.g. Baumann 2007), or static outlines of what market research is and does (Andrejevic 2001), and may be complemented by studies that see market research as more dynamic, and accounts for its effects by their workings (e.g. Arvidsson 2001, or Lezaun 2007) rather than assumptions about external factors. Lacking entirely in the article selection, but not entirely from academic scholarship, are texts that look at market researchers as people who are present in their work, and actually make it happen. The autoethnographic anthology chapter of Sunderland and Denny about their experience as qualitative marketing researchers is an example of the possibilities of this perspective (Zwick and Cayla 2011).

There is then the issue of understandings. In the articles forming the material for this study, the tendency has generally been to either take on a surveillance-oriented or managerial framework, with careful attention paid to power relations, and the creation of systems of (unequal) value in many consumption studies. This suits the use of Foucauldian analysis, Marxian studies, and also the inclusion of Miller and virtualism. However, the third understanding, that of ambiguity of reflection in market research, is one important step worth taking when interested in understanding market research as something that is performed by people. When looking at the creation of value systems
(such as the ‘productive consumer’) there is good reason to look at the practice, and enacting that goes on. If this paper would work towards further study of the academic interest in market research rather than the market researchers, these understandings could be explored more thoroughly as moral economies. Here, this Daston-inspired reading will have to give way to discussing the prompted direction of further study.

If we want to look at these values in terms of something more akin to what Callon means when talking about attachments (Callon 1998) we may have to go further into the socio-technical arrangements that are not prevalent within the articles reflecting scholarship on market research. This calls for hands-on study. Callon is also relevant, together with other ANT-oriented scholars because of his insistence on the use of the network model of conceiving of economic activity (he thus seems in line with Cronin, and is directly referenced by Arvidsson). The dealings of knowledge creation within economic organizations certainly appear to fit the bill for relevance (Callon 2005: 9).

Believing that my making sense of this generation of consumers relies on understanding what market researchers understand (and worry, value, and think about) I propose that these marketing professionals should be studied, as a community of knowledge creators. This is in line with the ambition to move beyond critical sociology towards focusing on the critical competence of actors, and the interactivity between the academy and the wider world which it studies (Callon 2005: 12; Latour 2005). As the process of marketing and market research has come to be a study area, there is room for an ethnographic parallel to Lien’s ethnography of marketing professionals (1997), with the alternate focus of market researchers. Ethnographic methods are no stranger to STS: What urges the anthropological perspective I hope to integrate with furthering this
project is that I believe that the local interpretation of these systems is of utmost importance (Latour 2005). I also believe that this will be best discerned not only by applying ethnographic methods and paying attention to the work performed (this would entail a focus on the practices of market research of interest both to anthropology and STS proper) but that boundary making such as that between consumer and observer plays a considerable role in the making of the market research world. In this Lien (1997) as well as Knorr-Cetina (1999) offer an anthropological interest in these matters, which I believe will prove complementary.

Ultimately, I believe that the ethnographic study of market researchers will open up for not only reflexive informants, but a sophisticated and recursive attention to the tension between insider and outsider: I have done work in market research, but hope to study market researchers as my natives (in the sense of the observed subjects of an ethnographic study). At the same time, the market researchers are part time consumers (as am I) that try to make sense of consumers as external Others. I am certain that the reflexivity does not happen only on my end, but with every step along this chain.

With marketing as an influential perspective in institutions throughout society, from the academy to business and government, its place in the world becomes worth studying. There are many questions that remain to be answered: How can the markets’ smallest constituents be discerned, and knowable? What is their ontological status? How may some of us be consumers, and others be consumption knowers? This paper has only begun this exploration by finding out more about what market research as an object of study and knowledge can and has been. While there is attention to the importance of
marketing discourse in many parts of society, how to successfully study it remains relatively open-ended.

**References**


