

## The question of 'alternatives' within food and drink markets and marketing: introduction to the special issue

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## **The question of 'alternatives' within food and drink markets and marketing**

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Food and drink markets are situated at the intersection of the global and local, the economic and cultural, the political and personal. The rise of alternative food and drink markets has emerged in response to the deficiencies of current market practices. This growth can be attributed not just to a desire for better quality food, but for different market relations, which can provide a more authentic and meaningful experience to consumers than straightforward economic exchange. Therefore alternative food and drink markets provide fertile ground for exploring important questions for marketing theory and practice, in particular issues relating to sustainable and ethical marketing. The *Journal of Marketing Management* has previously focussed attention on these issues, as one of the first marketing journals to dedicate a special issue to green marketing (Special Issue 14(6), 1998; McEachern & Carrigan, 2012). The journal has also provided a forum for exploring the ethical dynamics of consumer behaviour (Gregory-Smith, Smith, & Winklhofer, 2013; Hoek, Roling, & Holdsworth, 2013), the challenge of marketing sustainability (Rettie, Burchell, & Riley, 2012; Thøgersen & Zhou, 2012) and understanding consumers' perceptions of local and organic food (Gad Mohsen & Dacko, 2013; McEachern, Warnaby, Carrigan, & Szmigin, 2010). Nevertheless, exploration of alternative food and drink markets has predominantly flourished outside of the marketing field (see for example Goodman, Maye, & Holloway, 2010; Hinrichs, 2003; Holloway et al., 2007; Ricketts Hein, Ilbery, & Kneafsey, 2006; Schnell, 2013).

The consumption of food via conventional markets and the contemporary food system plays a significant role in shaping a wide range of social and environmental problems, pointing to alternative markets as a key practical space for effecting change. The organic movement, for instance, arose in response to human and environmental health concerns associated with industrial agriculture (Conford, 2001). The growth in the production and sale of organic produce is seemingly reflective of its success as an alternative market, likewise the now almost ubiquitous presence of Fairtrade coffee (see Johnston, this issue). Despite their potential to reshape market and production practices (Raynolds, 2000), both of these 'alternatives' have been subject to critique. The material practices and conceptual vagueness of so-called alternative markets have been questioned by food scholars, and consumers remain sceptical of the meaning and value of alternative labels (Eden, Bear, & Walker, 2008).

The availability of a wide range of organic produce in most major supermarkets would seem to undermine claims to alterity, and the work of Julie Guthman has laid bare the realities of organic production and consumption in the US (Guthman, 2003; Guthman, 2000, 2004).

Pratt's characterisation (2007, p. 287) of organic fruit and vegetables—'produced on large estates, using intensive methods and migrant wage-labour, ... trucked across the continent and mostly sold in supermarkets'—is hardly descriptive of what might be considered an alternative market. Whilst the organic movement may have started out with more progressive 'alternative' aims, these have been watered down through its absorption into the conventional market; similarly, Fairtrade products are now widely available, questioning their alterity and ethical positioning (Besky & Brown, 2015; Goodman et al., 2010). Both Fairtrade and organic produce rely on a narrative of alternativeness, whilst their production is often underpinned by a more conventional structure. Despite the intention to redefine the terms of trade, the Fairtrade premium does not always reach the low paid wage labourers engaged in producing it (Besky & Brown, 2015; Cramer, Johnston, Oya, & Sender, 2014), yet consumers can expect to see pictures of smiling producers adorning their packaging. The conventionalisation of alternative market offerings and the appropriation of their message in marketing material underlines the demand for continued scholarly attention. Critiques of organic and Fairtrade have highlighted the need to pay close attention to the ways in which alternative food and drink markets are enacted and marketed, and how consumers make sense of and act in response to this.

Following insights from scholars of critical management studies, geography, and sociology with regard to the social embeddedness of markets (e.g. Hinrichs, 2000; Sonnino & Marsden, 2006; Winter, 2003), this special issue calls attention to the processual interconnections between producers, consumers, and their intermediaries in the emergence of and prospects for alternative food and drink markets. The organising focus for the special issue emerged from the 9<sup>th</sup> International conference in Critical Management Studies, July 2015, which considered the possibilities, post-critique, for alternative markets and market relations, and where we organised a stream that considered this question through the lens of food and drink markets. In the special issue, we build on this foundation to include commentaries from prominent food and consumption scholars and a series of articles that draw on a rich array of empirical work, and bring together insights from multiple theoretical perspectives. The articles included underline the overlapping nature of mainstream and alternative food markets and the ways in which narratives of alternative products are appropriated for marketing in the mainstream food system.

Kajzer Mitchell, Low, Davenport and Brigham's article, *Running wild in the marketplace: The articulation and negotiation of an alternative food network*, focuses on wild foods: foods involving minimal involvement of humans prior to foraging or gathering. Drawing on survey, focus group and interview data with Canadian wild food participants, and analysis of related websites, the authors explore the emergent wild food Alternative Food Network (AFN). They suggest that the general capacity of AFNs to 're-localize' foods and re-connect producers and consumers is enhanced in the case of wild foods. The added promise of wild food is pedagogical: because of their inherent embeddedness in nature, wild foods and wild food

AFNs facilitate participants ('producers' (foragers and distributors) and consumers) to reflexively learn from their own environmental embeddedness. Nevertheless, like organic and Fairtrade foods, wild foods are situated within a dominant aesthetic regime that privileges authenticity, tradition and naturalness, and alongside a mainstream market prone to the adoption, assimilation and appropriation of the alternative (Low & Davenport, 2006). Thus, wild foods and their AFNs are vulnerable to material and symbolic annihilation via mainstreaming and the potential transformation from strong/local AFNs into weak/corporate versions (Follett, 2009). The dual character of AFNs is in evidence here, on the one hand serving as a potential site of practice and value formation that is opposed to the market, while on the other, providing a narrative and aesthetic patina with which to market conventional food and drink offerings (see also Ritzer this issue).

In their article, *Making a market for alternatives: Marketing devices and the qualification of a vegan milk substitute*, Fuentes and Fuentes take up insights from Science and Technology Studies and the literature on market devices (e.g. Cochoy, 2008) to provide a detailed examination of Oatly, a Swedish company selling vegan oat-based products. Their research—an object-focused ethnography—examines how the marketing devices of digital media (text, images, video and interactive functions), packaging and retail environments are deployed in the qualification of vegan milk substitutes as alternative *and* as a mainstream mass market product. Their analysis suggests how vegan products such as Oatly are an apt case study for the contingent processes and devices involved in marketing alternative products both as different from, yet similar to mainstream, normative options. In the case of Oatly, alternativeness is qualified through, for example, the opposition to normative dairy products and 'big agriculture' corporations, and its Swedishness (positioned as alternative to mainstream capitalist systems); while at the same time conventionality and mainstream appeal are qualified through, for example, the grouping of Oatly with dairy products in the retail environment, and provision of multiple points of attachment beyond simply being vegan (such as convenience and sustainability). Fuentes and Fuentes further underline the often conflicted dynamic between the story told by 'alternative' products and their material production and consumption. The product examined mobilizes both mainstream and oppositional values in seeking to appeal to consumers and thereby solidify an alternative product within the conventional market place.

Hopkinson's article, *Making a market for male dairy calves: Alternative and mainstream relationality*, traces the making and shaping of two markets for male dairy calves, a by-product of the dairy industry that is often treated as 'waste' in the UK. The article focuses on the overlap between systems, knowledge and actors and simultaneous development of two products. Combining news media, existing trade data, and organization websites to locate multiple voices from across many sectors, Hopkinson distils two narrative accounts: of rose veal and of dairy-bred beef. Although the two market versions are well distanced from one another in the media and in retail presentation, the accounts contradict neat categorization,

questioning the distance established between the two. Ultimately, advocating Actor Network Theory as a processual and relational approach, Hopkinson views alternative and mainstream markets as symbiotic, mutually supportive, and implicated in the circuit of culinary capital, serving the interests of retailers and food celebrities among other actors. In exploring differing market narratives stemming from the same material source – male dairy calves – Hopkinson brings the overlapping nature of the alternative and the mainstream to the fore. Despite the apparent narrative distancing between these two products, an examination of the actors and material practices beneath this account highlight their closeness and the way in which the narratives of products and markets can be misleading.

Batat, Peter, Vicdan, Manna, Ulusoy, Ulusoy, and Hong, in their article *Alternative food consumption (AFC): Idiocentric and allocentric factors of influence among low socio-economic status (SES) consumers*, conduct a meta-analysis to explore the factors that drive low socio-economic status consumer demands for plant-based, organic, and local diets in Western society. In focussing on low SES consumers, the authors diverge from the middle-class niche to which the appeal of alternative food and drink is often presumed to be limited (see also Smith Maguire, 2016 and Cherrier, this issue). They frame alternative food consumption as a dynamic process where idiocentric and allocentric factors influence the adoption of alternative diets among low SES consumers and contribute to food well-being, social justice, and sustainability. This perspective culminates with the definition of alternative food consumption in terms of any sustainable food consumption trying to meet economic (more equal distribution of wealth), environmental (protection of environmental resources), health (individual health and well-being), and social (solidarity and diversity) goals. Their proposed framework provides a basis for discussion of how public policy and marketing practices can contribute to social justice, sustainability, and food well-being among vulnerable populations. The study underlines the importance of understanding the values potentially underpinning consumption of alternative food and drink, raising the question of how these might be realised through market practices.

In *Food capacity in alternative food markets: Visceral encounters, bodily connections and contagious magic*, Cherrier foregrounds the agentic potential of food in ‘assembling’ alternative marketplaces. This case study focuses on a group of homeless people, perishable food from business donors, and an open urban space as components of ‘Food Share,’ a pseudonymous alternative food market that interacts with components of the broader institutional milieu. It is through the interplay of social, material, business, and spatial components that Food Share emerged and evolves. Cherrier’s analysis shows that tensions spark when alternative food provision misaligns with prevailing social norms, values, and institutional arrangements. Although these tensions threaten the alternative food market, Food Share volunteers maintain their activities through their engagement with the vitality of food via sensory encounters, physical involvement, and magical thinking. This article adds a counterpoint to the typical interpretations of alternative food markets in that economically

and socially disadvantaged consumers are leading the activities of Food Share rather than the middle-class consumers that we have come to expect to be driving these kinds of initiatives.

In another exploration of a food sharing scheme, Gollnhofer offers an ethnographic exploration of a non-monetary food distribution system and its associated processes of value transformation. In *Value transformation in alternative marketplace settings: An empirical investigation of a food redistribution system*, she discusses strategies through which the value of objects normally deemed to be 'waste' and outside of conventional exchange markets (that is, food discarded by supermarkets due to best before dates or aesthetic irregularities) is transformed. Focusing on Foodsharing, a German consumer-driven initiative, Gollnhofer explores the means by which food waste is rescued from incinerators and landfills and reframed as valuable—both as food, and as a carrier of ethical value. Important to value transformation for consumer/sharer participants were notions of inherent value (of food as edible resource), rituals (including practices of food collection and dispersal), sacrifice (in the service of a higher goal), and the charismatic leadership within the Foodsharing community. Retailer respondents were found to frame their participation in terms of indirect economic value and ethical value (reducing the cost of disposing of discarded food, and achieving CSR aims). Through the Foodsharing platform, retailers and consumers are engaged in alternative market relations and the construction of alternative valuations of goods.

In addition to the empirical articles summarized above, we are pleased to include commentaries from leading scholars whose work speaks directly to the opportunities for, and limitations to, alternatives within food and drink markets, and consumer culture more broadly. All three commentaries reinforce the overlapping and dialectical relationship between conventional and alternative food and drink markets. Johnston highlights how so-called alternative offerings often sit within the conventional context of big box supermarkets. Many products draw on an alternative marketing rhetoric in order to satisfy consumers' demands for something different, but without reflecting anything materially distinguishable from the mainstream. In her commentary, Johnston is thus interested in moving towards a more multi-faceted understanding of how alternative forms might contribute to challenging entrenched structural inequalities in the global food system, and effect meaningful change.

Schor and Fitzmaurice argue that the co-optation and conventionalization theses are overdetermined—hence their efforts to complicate the notion of conventionalization. Although the mainstream corporate food system exerts significant influence on alternatives, consumers cannot be assumed to be dupes, willing to accept prima facie the alternative narratives of conventional products. Nor can it be presumed that emergent alternatives will necessarily be absorbed into the conventional market place. Conventionalization is neither

black and white nor the end of the story. For example, the incorporation of organic produce into mainstream markets could be viewed as a positive shift despite the abandonment of the progressive principles that characterized the early organic movement. Furthermore, its place on supermarket shelves has arguably driven the creation of new forms of alternative markets and food networks such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) schemes and wild food initiatives (Kazjer Mitchell et al., this issue).

Ritzer is less optimistic about the potential of and for alternatives; as such, he questions whether 'true' alternatives can exist and persist in food and drink markets, alongside the pull of the mainstream market. The processes of rationalization, centralization and globalization threaten to empty out potential alternatives of their 'distinct content' leaving behind the production of sameness. At the same time, the financial gain offered by 'selling out' exerts a strong pull against alternative principles. Ritzer does see some potential for resistance in the practice of 'prosumption' – the interrelated processes of production and consumption – although these practices need to be viewed as a continuum. The work of consumers in a fast food outlet, placing their order on a touch screen or dispensing their own drinks, is considerably different from allotment gardeners producing their own vegetables. Consumers are more than one dimensional passive recipients; they have political and productive potential to drive alternative markets. This potential is further examined in Schor and Fitzmaurice's commentary, in which they explore a food swap established by a group of CSA consumers as an alternative market. However, in the case of the food swap, it is not the prospect of co-optation or conventionalization that threatens the market, but the alternative values of consumers themselves, creating a Goldilocks problem.

Whilst all commentators problematize the relationship between alternative and conventional markets, Johnston is clear that food scholars should not give up on the task of distinguishing alternatives from the damaging practices of the mainstream food system. She calls for a realistic appraisal of the extent of change that alternative markets can bring about, not least because consumers are embedded in a model of consumption and production that is difficult to challenge. Persuading consumers to reduce consumption is hard to market. Scaling up consumption standards through alternatives is more appealing than downgrading consumption and compromising on lifestyles, but such scaled-up alternatives remain vulnerable to absorption. The examples of Slow Food, CSA schemes, foraging, food swaps, urban farms, small-is-beautiful procurement priorities, and biodynamic production among many others provide a compelling case that the crises facing the hegemonic global food system are inseparable from the systemic and perpetual crises of capitalism. At the same time, they underline that alternatives are practiced in the here and now, and that their alternativeness is a potent form of cultural capital in contemporary consumer markets. The authors in this special issue make clear that there remains a crucial need for food markets and food marketing scholars to disentangle the material realities and

promotional narratives of self-proclaimed 'alternatives,' and to remain attentive to the ongoing interaction between alternatives and the mainstream. To take sustainability seriously is to seek the demise of sustainable 'alternatives,' for only by becoming mainstream can sustainability become durable (West, 2010). Such a move requires marketing scholars to assist in understanding how alternatives—the premium value and distinctive allure of which reside in their scarcity and difference—can transition into ethical, but banal, business-as-usual practices.

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