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The shaping of marketplace moral sentiments

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ABSTRACT

Existing research shows how morality and markets intersect. However, there are two oversights: 1) how morality is attributed to some markets and not others, and 2) how moral attributions on some markets change spatio-temporally. We conduct a *meta-synthesis* of 101 papers to develop a framework for how moral attributions on markets are shaped. First, we define the concept of *marketplace moral sentiment*. Next, we unpack the work of marketplace actors that destabilize, re-stabilize, and change marketplace moral sentiments. Through this, four distinct types of moral sentiments can form: harmonized, divided, dispersed, and enforced. We contribute to the literature on morality and markets by showing how markets are enacted and reconfigured through moral contestations. We also offer theoretical extensions related to organizational heterogeneity, a market's susceptibility to moral contestation, and the role of non-human actors in shaping marketplace moral sentiments. Finally, we discuss the managerial and policy implications of our work.

1. Introduction

Morality is concerned with the distinction between right and wrong behavior (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019) and intersects the marketplace and consumption in myriad ways. Markets are moral projects that imbue transactions, institutions, actors, goods, behaviors, and subjectivities with moralized meanings (Fourcade & Healy, 2007). Contemporary market societies are constantly challenged by countless morally charged crises: climate change, economic inequality, wars, pandemics, and geopolitical shifts. At the heart of these crises lies the issue of conflicting moral values that create tensions. Moral debates are concurrently a source of interpersonal and cultural tension and an opportunity for marketers to create new value propositions (Campbell & Winterich, 2018). For example, global discussions on anti-racism, crystallized around the Black Lives Matter movement in the USA and elsewhere, have been both an ongoing moral contestation between different groups and an opportunity for brands to position themselves around the movement: for, neutral, or against. Diverse and shifting positions around animal welfare, environmentalism, and consumerism continuously shape how people view the morality of meat, dairy, or air travel, thus shaping these markets. Recent research has also shown that the moral debates around some markets are constantly in flux, such as the commodification of human eggs (Hartman & Coslor, 2019), bullfighting

(Valor, Lloveras, & Papaoikonomou, 2020), reusable bags (Cherrier, 2006; Gonzalez-Arcos et al., 2021), the allocation of transplant organs (Roscoe, 2015) or cannabis (Huff, Humphreys, & Wilner, 2021).

Differences in moral attributions on markets across time and space suggest that morality is not a fixed state but is rather contextual. Callon and Roth (2021) explore how organ donations are judged differently across countries and, more specifically, how kidney donation evaded this moral tension through directed and non-directed donations. Furthermore, sociocultural disruptions can alleviate moral conflicts, even temporarily. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic amplified moral contestations in consumers' everyday lives: wearing masks (Silchenko & Visconti, 2021), getting a haircut (Abad Santos, 2020), or eating at a restaurant (Markoe, 2020) became sites of moral tensions. These examples illustrate how forming moral attributions on a market involves frequent contestations, ambiguities, and conflicts. Nonetheless, the literature remains fragmented, and it is unclear why some markets, and their associated objects and practices, are attributed moral connotations while others are not. Existing research has also not adequately explained the variances and changes in these moral attributions.

This paper responds to a growing need to study the increased importance of morality within market societies (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, 2015; Culiberg et al., 2022; Peifer et al., 2021; Sandikci, 2021; Wilk, 2001). Although existing literature demonstrates the relational

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and contested nature of moral attributions (Campbell & Winterich, 2018; Chow & Calvard, 2021; Luedicke et al., 2010; Shadnam et al., 2021), we identify two limitations that restrict the concept's theoretical capacities by creating ambiguities: 1) an unclear link between markets and their moral salience (i.e., how moral attributions are formed on some markets, and not others) which causes an overemphasis on specific contexts in studies of morality and neglect of others, and 2) a lack of a comprehensive account of how moral attributions on markets differ and change across contexts and time. Our paper addresses these limitations by proposing a theory of *marketplace moral sentiments*, which provides a framework for the cultural dynamics of moral attributions on markets.

We define *marketplace moral sentiments* as collectively formed moral attributions on a market and associated objects or practices. They reflect the cultural consensus, or lack thereof, on the morality of the market. We draw on a recent sociological definition of sentiment as "cultural patterns of feeling and emoting" that "tend to live on in the collective consciousness until they are collectively abandoned or radically transformed" (Gopaldas, 2014, 998). This allows us to see marketplace moral sentiments as socially contextualized amalgamations of moral attributions rather than individual-level assessments or inherent and immutable qualities of markets. Our paper thus asks: How are marketplace moral sentiments shaped and what are the different types of moral sentiments arising from this process? We answer this question by examining the joint work of marketplace actors responsible for shaping marketplace moral sentiments and the consequences of this work.

To do this, we conduct a *meta-synthesis* of existing work that tackles the interplay between morality and markets. A *meta-synthesis* allows for a systematic examination of the literature to provide new theoretical insights (Paterson et al., 2011). First, we abductively identify the marketplace actors who contribute to the formation of marketplace moral sentiments. Then, we demonstrate how these actors contribute to the formation and change of marketplace moral sentiments. Lastly, we develop a typology of marketplace moral sentiments that result from these actors' work: harmonized, divided, dispersed, and enforced. Our framework can be applied to a market (e.g., cigarette, green products, nail polish, counterfeit products) and its related practices (e.g., donating, stealing, animal farming).

Providing a framework that demonstrates the shaping of marketplace moral sentiments and the role of various actors in shaping such sentiments is useful from a theoretical and practical perspective. For scholars, this framework provides conceptual clarity to understand their research objects more precisely when they attribute morality to these objects. It also encourages the researchers to better establish assumptions about the morality of the markets they study. Our work also demonstrates how marketplace moral sentiments shape the market society. Lastly, we use the typology to highlight opportunities in existing research and offer theoretical extensions that pave the way for future research. On the practical side, this framework will help practitioners incorporate morality claims in their brands by providing a greater understanding of consumers' values, possible moral tensions surrounding their brands, and relevant anchors for product and brand positioning.

Our paper is organized in four sections. First, we synthesize the marketing literature to uncover missing theoretical spaces and highlight the need for a framework of marketplace moral sentiments. Second, we detail our method of creating a database of the existing research on morality in the marketplace. Third, using actor-network theory as our enabling lens, we identify the actors that contribute to shaping marketplace moral sentiments, show how they are enrolled in this process, and introduce a typology of such sentiments. Finally, we present the theoretical implications of our work and future research avenues. We start by establishing the benefits of having an overarching framework of morality and markets.

2. Why we need a theory of marketplace moral sentiments

Existing research discusses drivers for moral consumption (Minton

et al., 2019; Samper et al., 2018; Sandikci, 2021), moral identity and subjectification (Chatterjee et al., 2020; Farrow et al., 2021; Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Lee et al., 2014; Luedicke et al., 2010; Reed et al., 2007), and moral markets and economies (see Abid et al., 2022; Weinberger & Wallendorf, 2012). Our *meta-synthesis* uncovered three areas in need of more explicit assumptions and stronger analytical connections regarding the interplay between morality and markets: 1) how researchers assume the morality of a market, 2) how they form assumptions regarding the nature and the stability of its morality (i.e., a market is either inherently moral or immoral, and this quality is fixed), and 3) how they contextualize morality within other aspects of the market society. In this section, we summarize these limitations.

A *meta-synthesis* involves uncovering thematic gaps within the literature and field-level oversights rather than pinpointing omissions in individual papers. First, our analysis of the literature unveiled that most papers make a priori assumptions about the relationship between a market under inquiry and its morality without analytically or empirically justifying these assumptions. Papers often start without rationalizing how authors established the relationship between a market and its morality. For example, papers on donations or green consumption assume the inherent morality of such markets. Establishing the morality of a market through implicit or lay assumptions bears the risk of confirmation bias as researchers define their instruments, measure their constructs, and interpret their data through these presumptions rather than through theory-driven or empirically grounded assessments. Articulating assumptions allows for clearer theorization.

Second, our analysis reveals that most papers conceptualize morality as a stable character of their object of study without temporal or cultural contextualization. This assumption can impose a fixed moral framing on markets across time and space. We acknowledge that explaining how marketplace moral sentiments change, become destabilized or re-stabilized, or even become fragmented is beyond the scope of individual papers; however, contextualizing a market under study and describing the spatiotemporal boundary conditions of these assumptions prevents essentializing its morality. This is important for two reasons: 1) research projects take time to get published, with a potential shift in the moral sentiments on the context, and 2) assumptions about morality in a study conducted in one cultural context might not apply elsewhere. Researchers can benefit from rethinking their assumptions about their research context and acknowledging that these assumptions can shift over time or vary across contexts.

Finally, our analysis shows that existing research takes a piecemeal look at the role of actors and their interactions, often focusing on psychological differences between individuals. For example, papers investigate how personal psychological differences drive the intention to donate, reduce waste, or buy counterfeit products. Morality is a driving factor in myriad markets; however, it does not operate in a vacuum. A marketplace moral sentiment, with its associated objects and practices, is shaped through its entanglement with other aspects of market society (e.g., economic, cultural, or social institutions) and negotiated across various actors. Research on morality and markets focuses on fragmentary aspects of this big picture, and either treats the moral subject as an individual process (Samper et al., 2018; White et al., 2012), examines the interplay between the market and individuals (see Giesler & Veresiu, 2014), or focuses on the psychological drivers behind the moral attributions made by individuals (Kos Koklic et al., 2022). What is missing in this picture is a multi-level, multi-actor discussion that shows how cultural consensus (or lack thereof) is established surrounding the morality of a market. Our *meta-synthesis* concludes that there are missing analytical connections and taken-for-granted assumptions about the interaction between the individual, groups, and overarching organizations in structuring marketplace moral sentiments.

Our work aims to bring analytical clarity to the relationship between moral sentiments and markets (i.e., how morality is attributed to objects and practices or the market at large). To fulfill this task, we ask: 1) How are marketplace moral sentiments shaped (i.e., how is the relationship

between morality and a market established)? and 2) What are the different types of moral sentiments arising from this process? (i.e., the typology of marketplace moral sentiments)? Before discussing our theorization, we elaborate on our method.

3. Method

We conducted a *meta-synthesis* on the current state of the literature. A *meta-synthesis* is “a dynamic, iterative process of thinking, interpreting, creating, theorizing and reflecting (Paterson et al., 2011, 111)” on research to build a *meta-framework* or analysis. It enables us to reflect on the developments in a field with diverse methodological and theoretical approaches (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006) and pinpoint the assumptions underlying the body of research findings (Paterson et al., 2011). Rather than focusing only on the theoretical conclusions of papers, a *meta-synthesis* allows for integrating research assumptions and findings for a deeper engagement (Hoon, 2013; Paterson et al., 2011).

To accomplish this objective, we identified key journals with a high impact factor throughout our data collection period: *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Consumption Markets and Culture*, *Journal of Association of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Management*, and *Marketing Theory*. With their wide range of paradigmatic and methodological approaches, these journals allowed for a comprehensive synthesis of research on our topic.

We then searched for the following keywords in the journal articles: moral(s), morality, ethic(s), sustainability, value(s), and responsibility. These keywords were chosen because they were used interchangeably in research on morality and markets (Besio & Pronzini, 2014; Joy et al., 2012; McGavin, 2013; Thompson, 1996). Although we use the term morality as an encompassing construct in our theorization, when discussing a specific paper, we use the vocabulary chosen by its authors.

To select the articles, we first included the ‘anywhere’ option to ensure a comprehensive search. Later, we narrowed the selection to ensure that the topic of morality was salient in the paper. We made this assessment based on the relevance of the title, the abstract, and the full article. We then narrowed down the search results based on our research questions (Castilhos et al., 2017; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006; Timulak, 2009). We excluded papers discussing morality in more abstract terms without a specific market context. We established this boundary condition because sentiments in other areas (e.g., organizational, political) likely have their own unique actors and processes. We included all publications from 1992 to 2022. Our final sample consisted of 101 articles with a range of methodological and theoretical approaches, allowing for a comprehensive overview of the existing work on morality and markets. A list of these articles appears in [Appendix 1](#).

Finally, we reviewed the authors’ definition of morality (or lack thereof), their assumptions about morality, encompassing and related constructs, levels of analysis, and contexts. We then iteratively categorized and coded for all actors presented within these papers, noting their role in structuring the morality of the market of interest in the paper. Our iterative analysis showed that adopting an actor-network approach was the most appropriate enabling theory in explaining the multi-actor processes that shape the changes in marketplace moral sentiments.

4. Markets and moral sentiments

4.1. Moralizing actors

Markets are composed of connected actors and shaped by “the entry of new actors, the removal of existing actors, changes in the division of labor between actors, as well as changes in how actors are interconnected” (Kjellberg et al., 2015, p. 6). Our *meta-synthesis* first theorizes about the role of the various actors in shaping marketplace moral sentiments. We categorize these actors as individuals (see Luedicke et al., 2010), groups (see Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), and

organizations (see Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). Existing literature almost exclusively considers the role of the individual (Lee et al., 2014; Narwal & Rai, 2022; Ryoo, 2022), group (see Beardsworth & Keil, 1992), or organization in shaping moral subjectification (see Giesler & Veresiu, 2014) and responsibility (see Aboelenien, Arsel, & Cho, 2021; Coskuneri-Balli, 2020). However, the interaction between actors is crucial to understanding how a market becomes associated or disassociated with morality and is seldom explained. Below, we unpack these actors.

Individual actors refer to a single person, whether they are acting as a consumer or activist (or both). Individuals have moral values that they consider important (Narwal & Rai, 2022). These deeply held values guide the individual’s behavior, consumption, or moral attributions on a market (van Gils & Horton, 2019). The values can be acquired through primary socialization (e.g., Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013) or later due to a change in personal dispositions (e.g., Sandikci & Ger, 2010). An example of how individual values shape moral attributions can be seen in Eisend’s (2019) *meta-analysis* of the literature on counterfeits and pirated products. Eisend argued that perceptions of positive individual outcomes positively influence individual attitudes, perceptions, and intentions regarding consuming these products. As agents who can align with—or resist and disrupt—group and organizational judgments, individual actors are essential in shaping marketplace moral sentiments.

Groups are “informal and formal social arenas in which people who share common orientations, ties, interests, or foci interact” (Weinberger, 2015, p. 379). The boundaries of groups are porous and flexible, depending on the group’s social dynamics (Latour, 2005). Examples are family members, friends, co-workers, corporate alliances, unions, and other groups to whom the individual feels a sense of belonging. A group’s moral values are the identification of right and wrong behaviors that are important in unifying its members and establishing intergroup boundaries. These group values consist of core values that provide a “positive evaluation of the in-group (i.e., in-group favoritism) and [a] negative evaluation of a less successful out-group (i.e., out-group derogation)” (Leach et al., 2007, p. 235). Values can be central to an entire culture or subculture of consumption (see Sandikci & Ger, 2010; Schouten et al., 2007) and are important in shaping marketplace moral sentiments as they bind members and draw moralized boundaries between groups.

Finally, organizational values refer to those that transcend group boundaries and are institutionalized. Organizations can be religious, market-based, state-based, or political and are shaped by ideologies and narratives that permeate them. Organizational values bind groups and individuals to an organization and structure shared moral attributions. For example, Luedicke et al. (2010) describe how the moral position of Hummer owners draws from the value of American exceptionalism, which has historically shaped American national identity (Hughes, 2004).

While non-human actors also have a role in shaping the morality of markets, existing work in this area is limited. Huff et al. (2021) traced the changes in the material qualities of cannabis products that altered the meanings attributed to them in the market, eventually facilitating their acceptance. Gonzalez-Arcos et al. (2021) looked into how a moralized ban on the use of plastic bags altered consumers’ shopping practices. In the future research section, we discuss how incorporating non-human actors can further expose the interplay between morality and markets by taking into account the agency of such actors in an actor-network. As shown through the examples above, the moral attributions of individuals, groups, and organizations on a market are not always in sync with each other, causing disagreements and tensions about the morality of a market. Our multi-actor conceptualization unpacks these dynamics in the market.

4.2. Network translations and shaping of marketplace moral sentiments

Our framework aims to theorize how an actor-network shapes marketplace moral sentiments. We draw on actor-network theory to

illustrate the dynamics between marketplace actors that shape the marketplace moral sentiments. We conceptualize the marketplace moral sentiment on a market, either in its entirety or for a specific practice or object, as a product of network processes among various actors. An actor-network is dynamic, complex, and adaptive (Callon, 1986; Callon & Latour, 1986; Giesler, 2008), which allows for a multi-actor theorization that shows how a network (de)stabilizes (Callon & Latour, 1986) and how social phenomena are shaped through the interrelation and agency of multiple intersecting actors instead of causality strings and top-down relations (Latour, 2005; Martin & Schouten, 2013). This happens through translation.

Translation refers to the actors' actions, negotiations, and tactics to enroll others into a mutual existence and unite them toward a common goal (Callon & Latour, 1986; Laasch et al., 2020; Latour, 2005). For instance, Laasch et al. (2020) identified the role of apps in enrolling consumers and helping them build the competence to participate in responsible behavior. Actor-network theory allows us to conceptualize marketplace moral sentiments as temporally and contextually bound and an outcome of network translations rather than an inherent and permanent quality of a market. Translation occurs over four phases: problematization, intéressement, enrollment, and mobilization (Callon & Latour, 1986; Giesler, 2008, 2012). Not all translations result in network change: in the case of a successful phase, the actors move to the following phase, and in case of failures or betrayals, the network returns to its initial status (ibid). Through ANT and its stages of translation, we show how actors collectively shape a marketplace moral sentiment.

Problematization occurs when an actor defines a problem in the current state of a network (Giesler, 2008; Laasch et al., 2020). Our *meta*-synthesis demonstrates that problematization emerges when an interested actor morally contests an established moral attribution on a market. The values of this actor no longer align with the rest of the existing network actors. This problematization can be a latent moral dilemma or a novel moral aspect of a market due to changes in the cultural context. An example of the former is when activists problematize meat, historically linked to health and wealth, for its harm to animals (Aboelenien & Arsel, 2022). An example of the latter is the moral signification of medical masks during a pandemic (Silchenko & Visconti, 2021).

The problematizing actor seeks to unsettle the established moral sentiment on the market by negotiating with other actors (see Giesler, 2012; Maguire & Hardy, 2009). The negotiations involve the two stages of translation: intéressement and enrollment (Callon, 1986; Giesler, 2012). The problematizing actor incites other actors (i.e., individuals, groups, and organizations) to question the existing moral sentiment of the market. For example, in the early stages of immoralizing bullfighting in Spain, animal activists campaigned about its brutality to appeal to other individuals and groups, especially the younger generations (Valor et al., 2020).

Intéressement can either succeed or fail. If the actor succeeds in justifying their position, they enroll other actors in the problem and organize their roles in the network. However, if the problematizing actor fails to enroll other actors, the moral sentiment on the market reverts to its previous state. This is referred to in the literature as moments of *betrayal* (Callon, 1986; Canniford & Shankar, 2013). In the case of meat, the marketplace bears conflicting narratives around the object. Each narrative is mobilized by different moralizing actors (i.e., vegans, meat lobbies, activists) to support their attempts to moralize or im-moralize meat (Aboelenien & Arsel, 2022).

Finally, if all previous stages are successful, the problematizing actor mobilizes others towards their shared interests (Callon, 1984; Laasch et al., 2020). During this stage, the problematized market either restabilizes back to a previously held sentiment, a betrayal of the process, or stabilizes around a new sentiment as the translation moves to the next iteration. Marketplace moral sentiments are neither fixed nor monolithic, as they can be iteratively problematized by new contestations and contradictions even after momentary stabilization. For

example, there is no universal consensus regarding the morality around meat as it is still contested among vegans, vegetarians, meat-eaters, and meat-eaters who only consume animals raised according to specific ethical standards (Aboelenien & Arsel, 2022). Fig. 1 summarizes the iterative nature of network translations between marketplace actors.

4.3. Types of marketplace moral sentiments

Having described the actors and their role in shaping the marketplace moral sentiments, we now discuss the outcomes. As translation is an iterative process, the types of moral sentiments we identify need to be considered as moments in translation rather than permanent formations, as betrayal can lead the actors to fail to move the process forward. We classify the types of marketplace moral sentiments based on two dimensions: the problematizing actor and the alignment of the actors' values. First, we differentiate between each type of sentiment by identifying the main actor behind the problematization. Inherent within this dimension is the actor's own network previously established with other actors, hence their ability to swiftly recruit others to their cause. For example, individual actors with weak ties may not have the necessary network to support their problematization compared to organizations. Hence, it is relatively easier for organizations to connect and mobilize other actors than individuals and groups.

The second dimension is the alignment of the actors' values, which refers to the presence or absence of consensus between the marketplace actors' moral attributions on a market. Alignment is crucial in shaping the marketplace moral sentiment as different actors bring different, and sometimes conflicting, judgments to the market. Alignment is shaped by an actor's capacity to influence other actors' judgments and mobilize them in the marketplace by forming and breaking links (Callon & Latour, 1986). We acknowledge that the alignment of values is a complex construct that is more than a dichotomy; however, in our *meta*-synthesis, we could only identify whether or not an alignment of actors exists rather than quantify it more granularly on a scale. Thus, we conceptualize it as either aligned or misaligned.

When values align, all three actors attribute the same moral attributions on a market. Alignment is likely when organizations are powerful, and groups and individuals express solidarity with and accept organizational values. When values are misaligned, there is no agreement between individuals, groups, and organizations, and the marketplace moral sentiment is unstable. For example, two actors can share similar moral judgments, while a third actor disagrees with them, resulting in a discordant marketplace moral sentiment. Based on these two dimensions—problematizing actor and alignment of actors—we identify four types of sentiments, as summarized in Table 1.

4.3.1. Harmonized marketplace moral sentiments

Harmonized marketplace moral sentiments are formed when all market actors have aligned values and no problematizing actor is questioning the morality of a market. Examples of harmonized sentiments in the literature include the markets encompassing gifts (Weinberger & Wallendorf, 2012) and charity (Spielmann, 2021; Zhu et al., 2017). All actors are interested in maintaining the existing or recently stabilized moral sentiment with no attempts to enroll other actors to change it. Organizations (e.g., governments) structure and protect these harmonious sentiments. Values are enforceable by institutional power and trickled down to groups to follow them, creating the first link of alignment (see Christians & Traber, 1997). Groups guide the individuals' attribution on the market, who in return internalize these values.

Weinberger and Wallendorf (2012) show how gifting was valorized to maintain social cohesion during Mardi Gras in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, including between members of different communities and between members bearing different social status. Despite the devastation from the hurricane, individuals supported the event as a means of "community rebirth and renewed collective identity" (80).

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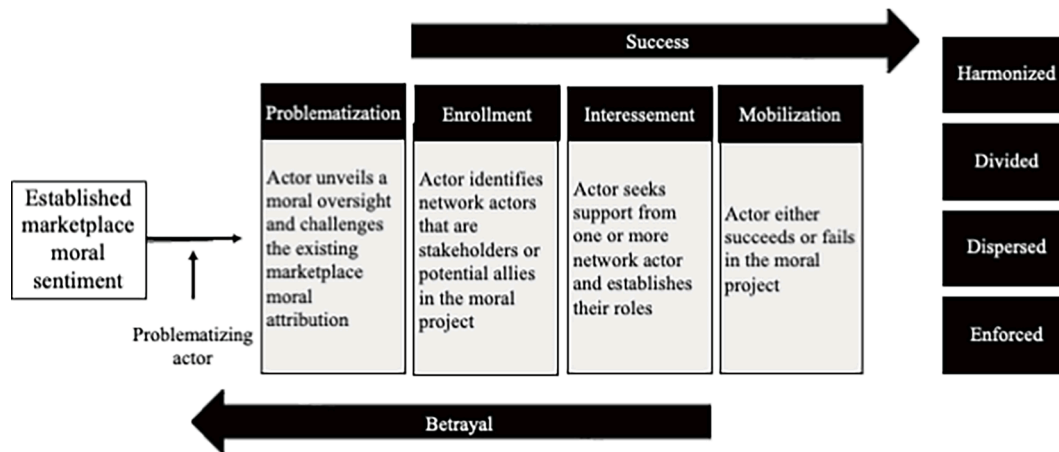


Fig. 1. The shaping of marketplace moral sentiments.

Table 1
Summary of four moral sentiment types.

Moral Sentiment	Problematizing actor(s)	Alignment	Examples in the literature
Harmonized	None	Aligned	Gifts (Weinberger, 2015; Weinberger & Wallendorf, 2012), charity (Reed et al., 2007), and donations (Reed et al., 2007; Wu et al., 2021)
Divided	Groups	Misaligned	Starbucks (Simon, 2011), counterfeit products (Chen et al., 2009), luxury fashion (Ma et al., 2021), pirated software (Eisend, 2019), AI (Du & Xie, 2021), monetization of egg donation (Hartman & Coslor, 2019), and Nike (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004)
Dispersed	Individuals	Misaligned	Tesettir fashion (Sandikci & Ger, 2010), Bullfighting (Valor et al., 2020), Hummer (Luedicke et al., 2010), and beauty market (Samper et al., 2018)
Enforced	Organizations	Misaligned	COVID safety (Aboelenien et al., 2021), plastic shopping bags (Gonzalez-Arcos et al., 2021), foie gras (Cherrier & Türe, 2022), and green products (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014)

High-status community members, organized as krewes, validated these values by participating in gift-giving despite their financial difficulties. Organizations, represented by city officials and businesses, supported the event by subsidizing the costs usually covered by the city. The actors' moral judgments on the gifts were aligned.

4.3.2. Divided marketplace moral sentiments

Divided marketplace moral sentiments are formed when a market has an unstable network of actors with misaligned values due to a non-dominant problematizing group. This group questions the established marketplace moral sentiment and lobbies for change by enrolling other actors. These markets involve unaligned values of groups, such as consumers moralizing and morally stigmatizing Hummers (see Luedicke et al., 2010), but the problematizing group does not have enough power to enroll all market actors. Groups are linked to some, but not all,

organizational values, which helps them define their group boundaries within the network (see Schouten, Martin, & McAlexander, 2007; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Individuals are divided along group lines. The group aims to persuade other actors to join the network and form an alliance (Giesler, 2012) to justify a shift in moral judgment. These markets follow much of the boundary-making negotiations (see Lamont & Molnár, 2002) to ensure positive relationships between the members and clearly distinguish their values from those of others.

Examples of literature on divided marketplace moral sentiments include work on communities of consumption, subcultures of consumption, and cultural differences (Kang & Park, 2022; Karataş & Sandikci, 2013; Schouten et al., 2007; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Though it was not the main focus of the research, the literature on subcultures implicitly discusses how morality is shaped in group practices. For example, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) highlight the ethos of the Harley Davidson subculture. While outside this brand community, the practice of riding the bike, and the bike itself as an object, might be deemed irrelevant to morality, within the subculture, the bike is associated with a commitment to, and enactment of, personal freedom, patriotism, American heritage, and machismo. Though these values might appeal to a broader audience beyond the subculture (patriotism and veterans, for example), these objects and practices are seen as a-moralized or even im-moralized by actors outside the brand community.

Another example of a divided marketplace moral sentiment is highlighted by Karataş and Sandikci (2013) in their work on the practices of religious consumption of the Turkey-based Gülen religious community and the formation of the group's moral identity. Actors' enrollment in this religious community is maintained through continuous recruitment of individuals, and alignment is achieved through education. Within the group boundaries, particular practices are introduced to new members through a positive moral connotation. However, the Gülen community is one of many religious and non-religious groups in Turkey who might disagree with Gülenists about these moral judgments. Furthermore, Gülenist values were only partially aligned with the Turkish government's moral judgments, mainly on the value of the free market and modern education. The divided marketplace moral sentiments (e.g., the unique form of religious practices) are protected and reproduced through the agencies of high-status individuals in the group as they wield significant social capital (Ignatow, 2009). These individuals protect their investment in the group and differentiate between authentic and inauthentic individuals within the group (see Arsel & Thompson, 2011; Karataş & Sandikci, 2013; Schouten, Martin, & McAlexander, 2007).

4.3.3. Dispersed marketplace moral sentiments

Dispersed marketplace moral sentiments are present in markets with an unstable network of actors with misaligned values. Individuals problematize the existing moral sentiment on a market and advocate for new values. They challenge the stability of a marketplace moral sentiment, and accordingly, face stigmatization as they are unable to enlist support from other groups. When the values of individuals are misaligned with those of groups and organizations they affiliate with, individuals strive to mobilize other actors (see Callon, 1984; Callon & Law, 1982; Giesler, 2012) to challenge the established marketplace moral sentiment.

Research has focused on the motives and rationales of individuals breaking from the normalized market values (see Minson & Monin, 2012; Sandikci & Ger, 2010; Twine, 2014). For example, Chen, Pan, and Pan (2009) investigated the individual-level factors of moral intensity and moral judgment to explore individuals' tendency to participate in software piracy. When a market—here, pirated software—is im-moralized by organizations and groups, the moral judgments of individuals who participate in it misalign with those groups and organizations.

Another example is Sandikci and Ger's (2010) work on middle-class Turkish women who ascribed morality to the practice of veiling and the *tesettür* fashion market. While Turkish political structure has changed since the authors published this study, at that moment, veiling was negatively perceived and even stigmatized by the dominantly secular Turkish middle class, who associated it with lower-class individuals (Sandikci & Ger, 2010). The moral attributions on the practice expressed by the participants in the study were not aligned with the rest of the society, which a-moralized or im-moralized veiling. Middle-class women who practiced veiling started to problematize this sentiment on the *tesettür* market and used their capacities to enroll other actors to change it.

Valor et al. (2020) presented another case of a dispersed marketplace moral sentiment with their study on the im-moralization of bullfighting in Spain. As a result of new contestations, the positive sentiment on the once normalized practice was questioned. While some groups and organizations still enjoyed and practiced bullfighting, activist individuals attempted to enroll others into their network to transform the moral sentiment on bullfighting and im-moralize it.

4.3.4. Enforced marketplace moral sentiments

Enforced marketplace moral sentiments are formed on markets with an unstable network of actors with misaligned values and an organization that problematizes the existing moral sentiment. With an established network with other actors, organizations have relatively stronger capacities to mobilize change compared to individuals and groups without the need for the latter to agree with the organization. In enforced marketplace moral sentiments, behavioral change is not the result of an alignment between individuals and the government but rather dictated by the organization.

The ban on plastic bags is an example of enforced moral sentiments through government regulation. (Gonzalez-Arcos et al., 2021). By controlling the use of plastic bags and framing their use as immoral, the government enforced other actors (consumers and other organizations) to comply despite their resistance and misalignment with the government's imposed moral values. Another example is the creation of moral citizens through the work of the World Economic Forum (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). Through responsabilization, the WEF enforces moralistic governance regimes and shapes consumption subjectivities. The active creation and top-down institutionalization of moralistic regimes, including policies and marketplace norms, renders various markets such as energy-efficient devices, microloans, and exercising morally salient for consumers.

4.4. The ongoing shaping of marketplace moral sentiments

Previous work has highlighted how cultural attributions on markets such as casino gambling and Botox changed through various marketplace processes (Giesler, 2008; Humphreys, 2010). Our work builds on these papers to ask how continuous network translations between organizational, group, and individual actors change marketplace moral sentiments. To illustrate this, we map the changing marketplace moral sentiments (and the multi-actor processes) on tattoos in the United States through time. In the early 1910s, tattoos were primarily used by two groups: sailors and circus performers (DeMello, 2000; Loos, 2014). Sailors used tattoos to flaunt their travel achievements to each other (DeMello, 2000); circus performers, who were referred to as "freaks" at that time, fashioned tattoos for entertainment purposes (Parry, 2006; Porcella, 2009). Tattooing was also common in Indigenous communities (Deter-Wolf & Diaz-Granados, 2013). Each of these groups had a favorable moral attribution on the market.

However, within mainstream society, tattoos were a taboo object, and wearing a tattoo marked one as an outsider. Architect and theorist Adolf Loos famously said in an essay, "The modern man who tattoos himself is a criminal or a degenerate" (Loos 1908, reprinted in 2014). The moral attribution on the market at large was negative among the mainstream society. Thus, the moral sentiment on tattoos was divided, as minority groups had different values than dominant groups and organizations.

During WWII, the moral sentiment on tattoos shifted as they were increasingly used to demonstrate loyalty to the United States (DeMello, 2000; Parry, 2006). At the time, patriotism was a shared value between individuals, groups, and organizations. At first, the U.S. armed forces demanded tattoos of military IDs and social security numbers before going to war as a form of identification since the loss of life was expected. Later, soldiers began wearing symbolic tattoos (e.g., Death before Dishonor) to commemorate their journey, bravery, and patriotism for the United States (Russo, 2020). The state's (re)moralization of tattoos facilitated the social acceptance of patriotic tattoos, which eventually enrolled the other actors to reconsider their moral attribution, thus re-driving the marketplace moral sentiment towards harmonization.

After the war, the United States government banned tattooing, claiming that the practice facilitated the spread of diseases (DeMello, 2000). The marketplace moral sentiment shifted once more as health organizations portrayed tattooing as an unsafe practice. However, tattooing continued to be practiced by some individuals, particularly from marginalized groups such as gangs, punks (Steward, 1990), and rock musicians (Mifflin, 2013). The practice was judged immoral by the overarching organization—the government—and mainstream groups in society. This misalignment re-established the sentiment on the tattoo market as a divided one.

In the 1980s, tattoo artists, who perceived it as an art form (Irwin, 2001; Patterson, 2018), began problematizing the negative sentiments on tattoos. They mobilized their capacities to enroll other actors and re-moralize the sentiments on tattooing. This movement transformed the sentiment on the market into a dispersed one, with individual actors seeking change.

By the 2000s, multiple actors contributed to shifting the moral sentiment on tattoos. The perception of tattoos as an a-moralized consumption object with neither negative nor positive moral attribution fueled a massive expansion in the number of tattoo parlors. (Patterson, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2006). In addition, media outlets facilitated this shift in attributions among the suburban middle classes. (Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson, 2005; Patterson, 2018). This harmonized the sentiment on the practice, making it mainstream (Patterson, 2018). As we show above, through these multiple translations, the moral sentiment on a market can continuously change through the work of actors with a stake in the moral attributions on the market.

5. Discussion and future research agenda

Previous literature has acknowledged the increasing importance of studying morality, given its intertwined nature with the different facets of markets. Our *meta*-synthesis shows the need for analytical clarity and frameworks to operationalize the dynamic relationship between markets and the moral attributions on them. To address this, we provide a theoretical framework for future researchers. We show that marketplace moral sentiments are culturally ascribed to markets through a multi-actor network translation contingent on the problematizing actors (i. e., individuals, groups, and organizations) and the alignment of their values. These translations result in four distinct sentiments: harmonized, divided, dispersed, and enforced. We concluded our theorization by providing an example of how the marketplace moral sentiments on tattoos have been continuously challenged and changed. Our *meta*-synthesis highlights the importance of contextualizing the relationship between morality and markets across time and space.

Our framework is important for business scholars as it provides much-needed analytical clarity in theorizing about morality and markets. First, our process allows for a more transparent explanation of the moral framing of a research question (i.e., for whom this market is moralized and what the consensus is about the moral attributions on it). We invite future researchers to clarify their assumptions about the morality of a market or a context by identifying the actors and associated networks negotiating its morality. Second, we provide researchers with the opportunity to reflect on the dynamic relationship between morality and markets, including the ascription of sentiments to new markets and re-ascription to established ones. Third, our typology identifies different types of moral contestations on divisive markets and the way these contestations are socially produced and sustained. Fourth, our theorization allows researchers to acknowledge the interwoven link between morality, markets, other aspects of social life, and the interaction between social actors such as groups and organizations. Finally, we reiterate [Fourcade and Healy's \(2007\)](#) call for researchers to be more reflexive in their contribution to the creation of moralized categories in their research on markets.

A framework about marketplace moral sentiments is important in the age of an ever-evolving market society where highly polarized arguments about what is right and wrong affect markets, organizations, the economy, technology, and the planet. Moral sentiments can potentially influence systemic shifts, market-based solutions, and market-based obstacles to solutions. Examples such as the sudden moralization and then a-moralization of medical masks, destigmatization of tattoos, a-moralization of recreational cannabis in some countries, morally divided arguments about the value of electric cars, moral contestations surrounding AI, and polarization around lab-grown meat show that the morality of markets is never settled and always subject to cultural negotiations, mobilizations, and network translations. Our work allows practitioners and policymakers to better understand the fragmented nature of a market society. Here, we note a methodological opportunity to use our typology as a lens to examine social media sentiments surrounding markets. For example, managers or policymakers who conduct sentiment analysis on various moralized issues can better understand the structure and heterogeneity of these sentiments—as well as how they evolve and change—by looking more deeply at the actors and processes that are involved in the market. Policymakers can also assess marketplace moral sentiments and be proactive in preventing actors from gathering enough support to shift the cultural consensus on issues that could harm citizens, such as the rise of the global anti-vax movement or increased support for gun violence. Next, we offer two theoretical extensions to the study of marketplace moral sentiments: organizational moral heterogeneity, a market's susceptibility to moral contestation, and the role of non-human actors. We conclude with three areas of substantive research for work on artificial intelligence, social media, and brand positioning.

5.1. Substantive areas for research

5.1.1. Organizational moral heterogeneity

While existing research acknowledged misalignment across actors, as well as between individuals and between groups, misalignments within organizations were not much examined. We refer to this as organizational moral heterogeneity. Examples include disagreements and shifting attitudes within scientific organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding the morality of markets such as vaccinations, masks, entertainment, leisure, and travel ([Farr, 2020](#)). Moral disagreements within the scientific community also extend beyond COVID-19 to issues such as vaping, moderate drinking during pregnancy, and the optimal food intake or body size for health. Existing work also demonstrated this heterogeneity in the regulations of organ donations and the allocation of transplant organs ([Hartman & Coslor, 2019](#); [Roscoe, 2015](#)).

Investigating the lack of internal consensus in organizations about the morality of a market can reveal how moralized negotiations unfold through different power dynamics. This could allow researchers to uncover other types of moral sentiments we did not account for in this paper. For example, our framework could be used to understand how organizations internally negotiate moral attributions on markets by resolving internal value misalignments. Researchers can also investigate how existing organizational moral heterogeneity of the problematizing actor can impact the enrollment of actors during the translation process and how this internal conflict influences its ability to shape the marketplace moral sentiment. To capture organizational heterogeneity, researchers need to examine discrepancies and differences within organizations without any assumptions about a moral consensus.

5.1.2. Susceptibility of markets for contestation

Actor-network theory embraces the possibility of change to the network's components as new components are added and others are discarded ([Callon & Law, 1982](#); [Latour, 2005](#)). Our theorization highlighted the role of three types of actors in a network and their capacity to shape marketplace moral sentiments. Yet it remains unclear why some markets appear inherently more stable, thus enabling them to withstand problematization. Some markets might also be inherently more fragile, causing them to be more vulnerable to contestations. We invite researchers to develop frameworks to assess the vulnerability of markets and to establish their assumptions and boundary conditions accordingly. For practitioners, a clearer understanding of a market's susceptibility can be used as a diagnostic measure to manage, maintain, or protect moral sentiments on which their practices are dependent, such as marketing communications.

Here, researchers can examine the nature of the markets, the networks that shape them, and the motivation of actors to problematize the nature of the existing sentiment. We ask the following questions for future inquiry: Are some markets always associated with a positive or negative moral sentiment? If so, what are the qualities of markets that help them uphold stable moral attributions across space and time? Is stability an inherent quality of the market, or is it related to the qualities of the network of actors (and their capacities)? What is the role of non-human actors and objects in shaping marketplace moral sentiments? How can actors equip themselves with capacities to problematize or protect the markets of their interest? What motivates actors to problematize the existing marketplace moral sentiment? Additional research can also explore how marketplace moral sentiments become reinforced globally or expand spatially and temporally. Researchers can also expand their data collection and seek novel markets not normally framed as morally relevant.

Finally, although research has addressed how moral-washing practices or moral transgressions can change moral sentiments on brands and corporations, it has not fully explored violations by individuals. Here, we refer to the moralized or im-moralized actions of CEOs, celebrities, or even ordinary persons that gain publicity (e.g., on social media) after they engage in moralized or im-moralized acts in public view. How do

moral sentiments towards people differ from those on objects (brands, products) or practices, especially given the difference in the expressive capacity of the person compared to non-human entities?

5.1.3. Role of non-human actors

Actor-network theory presupposes equal agency for human and non-human actors in terms of their capacities to disrupt and reshape a network (Callon & Law, 1982; Latour, 2005). Prior literature has acknowledged the role of human actors in shaping marketplace legitimacy (Huff et al., 2021); however, in existing work on morality, the role of non-human actors is scarcely discussed. Future research can explore the dynamics between human and non-human actors (such as heat waves, floods, machines, new technology, and viruses) in a network to negotiate moral attributions. Researchers can examine how non-human actors enroll others in a network and the level of alignments and misalignments between both human and non-human actors.

5.2. Substantive areas for the application of the framework

The market society and morality are intertwined. Fourcade and Healy (2007) describe markets as moral projects. In this paper, we showcase how marketplace moral sentiments are negotiated across marketplace actors. We suggest managers keep track of the marketplace moral sentiments in which they are involved without assuming that the sentiment is a monolith, but instead be attuned to differences across different actors (organizations, individuals, groups). Attention to the differences across actors will enable them to proactively identify possible points of contestation. We recommend this be done even for markets seen as morally irrelevant, as we have shown that amoral products can gain a moral status as their networks face translations. Our framework can be generative for research in three areas: brand management, artificial intelligence, and social media.

Previous research in brand management has investigated how morality drives consumers towards or away from brands as part of their identity projects (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Luedicke et al., 2010; Simon, 2011). This research has focused on consumers' role in problematizing and enrolling other actors in (anti)brand activism. However, from a brand-centric perspective, how firms are shaped by, and shape, moral sentiments on product categories or production practices (such as electric cars or the circular economy) is less explored. Our work can be applied to better understand these dynamics. For instance, when the morality of fast fashion became problematized by concerned actors in the market, brands responded differently to these shifts in marketplace moral sentiments. Some made partial efforts to show superficial alignment with the shifting moral sentiments, while others took a more activist role in driving an increasingly moralized market. For example, H&M's Conscious Collection was criticized for greenwashing (Cerini, 2022), whereas Patagonia was largely lauded for planning its entire production cycle guided by environmental sustainability practices (Cappon, 2022). Managers can better understand consumer sentiments around these brands if they account for the multiple actors that shape them and the type of sentiment (in this case, divided) ascribed to the overall market. Our work can also help practitioners better understand why corporate social responsibility initiatives, brand activism, and corporate donations do not consistently achieve the intended positive outcomes when the broader marketplace sentiment is overlooked. Lastly, we invite practitioners to be reflexive in pursuing activism or seeking attention (e.g., using a morally contested hashtag or a provocative campaign) as appropriating or mobilizing trending moral attributions could cause an anti-brand backlash or even harm people or the environment.

While AI provides benefits (e.g., automation and personalization), its use in several market practices such as employee recruitment, transportation, home automation, services, education, and mental health care raises moral challenges. There are many debates regarding the benefits and harms of AI on societal wellbeing, such as the accountability of

actors in the case of product or service failures, algorithmic discrimination, and breaches of privacy (Pazzanese, 2020). As our work shows, regardless of whether the sentiments on these market practices are harmonious or contested and negotiated, cultural-level sentiments about the morality of a practice do not always reflect whether the practice is inherently good or harmful. Instead, this sentiment is the outcome of a negotiation of actors with different capacities and interests. We recommend policymakers consider their role in enforcing changes in collective moral attributions related to societal wellbeing. For example, when an autopilot Tesla car is involved in a crash, killing the driver (Press, 2022; Reuters, 2022), policymakers need to consider their role in problematizing the harms of a technology that is not yet perfected.

AI also brings about new moral grey zones concerning data privacy and mining. Consumers usually consent to share their information with app developers because they are not well equipped to make moral attributions due to the deliberate opacity of privacy practices, which scholars call "digital resignation" (Draper & Turow, 2019). These nascent contexts raise questions about the role of policymakers in enforcing control over market practices with divided or dispersed sentiments. These questions also apply to algorithmic decision-making in hiring or medical contexts, especially since evidence shows these systems are inherently biased in their development (Gerke et al., 2020).

Finally, research on social media and influencers can benefit from a deeper examination of moral sentiments. Topics such as child influencers, cyberbullying, unsolicited and non-consensual sexting, sex trafficking, and fake dating accounts are currently problematized by various actors. Parents putting their children to work as influencers are framed differently than child labor, even though both monetize the labor of people who cannot give proper consent. Additional moral concerns are raised about the privacy of minors, such as access to their photos and their vulnerability to predators. In addition to policymakers, social media platforms should question their own role in overseeing these accounts, given their potential harm to children, and take an active role in problematizing certain practices on their platforms. These recommendations also extend to brands that rely on child influencers as part of their corporate communication strategy.

Lastly, our framework can be used to examine the shaping of social media sentiments on markets that can be potentially harmful. Researchers need to determine at which point intervention becomes necessary to problematize a marketplace moral sentiment and with whom this responsibility lies. Public policy initiatives can also examine the responsibility of platforms in preventing the amplification of hate speech and harassment. From a branding perspective, marketing managers can cautiously weigh the risks of engaging divided or dispersed sentiments against the potential for increased audience engagement with their brand.

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Aya Aboelenien: Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Zeynep Arsel:** Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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