

Can digital platforms support moralized markets? An analysis of affordances that matter to moralization

Marketing Theory
2023, Vol. 0(0) 1–16
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DOI: 10.1177/14705931231207321
journals.sagepub.com/home/mtq



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Abstract

The affordances offered by digital platforms may support the formation and maintenance of moralized markets – defined as markets that are undergirded with explicit moral principles that guide the interactions between market actors. In this paper, we draw on key tenets from recent advances in affordance theory, identifying social media platform affordances that support the moralization of digital markets. We develop insights based on qualitative data from the context of Norwegian digital local food markets, with focus on the role of digital affordances. We theorize particular ‘moral affordances’ that matter in the moralization of markets. We conclude by considering the possible outcomes that the increasing use of digital platforms may have for the moralization of contemporary markets.

Keywords

Digital platforms, local food markets, moral markets, moralization of markets, moral affordances, social media platform affordances

Introduction

Moralized markets are flourishing, ranging from sustainable food markets to ethical fashion markets and green housing markets. Arguably, largely due to growing social forces based on heightened knowledgeability (Stehr and Adolf, 2010), an increase in the influence of values and norms on markets is evident in many sectors (Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård, 2007). Consequently, a multidisciplinary body of literature is drawing increased attention to moralized markets

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(e.g. Fourcade and Healy, 2007; Stehr and Adolfo 2010). In particular, attention is being directed toward markets founded on *explicit* sets of moral codes, and the term ‘moralized market’ is sometimes reserved for those markets in which some moral values have been specifically articulated (e.g. Balsiger, 2021; Suckert, 2018).

One example of this type of moralized market is found within ethical fashion consumption (Balsiger, 2014, 2016); for example, concepts such as ‘eco fashion’, ‘slow fashion’ and ‘circular fashion’, have led to a rapid growth in markets that promote sustainable fashion options (e.g. Carrington et al., 2016). Another example of such moralized markets can be found in alternative food consumption (e.g. Batat et al., 2016), for instance, community-supported agriculture (CSA; e.g. Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007: 147), which is conceptualized as a form of ethical consumerism that is organized by a nexus of ideological discourses.

A common concern in studies of moralized markets is how they may introduce or preserve explicit moral principles in the face of forces such as price competition and regulations that might otherwise undermine them (Balsiger, 2021; Izberk-Bilgin, 2012; Suckert, 2018; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007).

In this article, we direct attention towards one market moralization-supporting factor that has been acknowledged, but not explicitly investigated, in prior research on contemporary markets: the affordances offered by digital platforms. Paradoxically, digital platforms are often theorized to support *immoral* actions, such as cyberbullying and catfishing (Edwards et al., 2016), and to date, researchers concerned with the digital transformation of moralized markets have tended to be concerned with the legitimacy and legality of digital platforms (Balsiger, 2016; Liu et al., 2021) and the rise of ‘darknet’ markets (Serafin, 2019). To complement research on the potentially corrosive effects of digitalization on moralized markets, this article explores how digitalization may also support market moralization. A number of recent studies point to the potential for digital platforms to support the goals of market activists (e.g. Earl and Kimport, 2011; Gollnhofner et al., 2019; Parmentier and Fischer, 2015; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013; Schneider et al., 2017; Weijo et al., 2018), self-branding (Gandini, 2016), consumer empowerment (Kozinets et al., 2021) and new forms of possession (digital possessions; Mardon et al., 2022). Despite these observations, it remains unclear how platform characteristics may support market moralization in particular.

In order to address this oversight, we draw upon the concept of ‘affordances’ (Gibson, 1977) to explore the ways in which and extent to which platforms may support market moralization in contexts intent on sustaining explicit moral codes. The term affordances refer to the features of a technology that provide people with the potential to achieve the particular outcomes for which they may be striving (Majchrzak et al., 2013). Specifically, we explore the following research question: *How do the affordances of digital platforms enable market moralization?*

It is important to address this research question to expand our knowledge and understanding of the dynamics of market moralization. While we know that moral values do not automatically reproduce themselves in markets (e.g. Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013), we lack knowledge of how they may be sustained. To gain insight into how digital affordances matter to market moralization, we draw on empirical data from an ethnographic study of multiple REKO markets in Norway. REKO markets are local food markets based on explicit moral principles, where the communications and transactions are primarily conducted via groups organized on the social media platform Facebook; therefore, these markets represent an ideal illustration of a moralized market that can draw support from digital platform affordances. Building on this foundation, and on the growing interest amongst consumer researchers in applying an affordance theory lens (e.g. Kozinets et al., 2021; Mardon et al., 2022), we contribute to the understanding of how digital platforms may support the moralization of markets.

An affordance lens on market moralization

The rise of moralized markets has been discussed in multiple strands of research in fields including economics, sociology and critical political economy (Balsiger, 2016; Fourcade and Healy, 2007; Stehr, 2015; Suckert, 2018). What these strands have in common is that they all offer some sort of theoretical account of how moralized markets work and evolve. They also share an understanding of markets as sociocultural entities that are not only the products of human practice and sense making (Abolafia, 1998; Knorr Cetina and Bruegger, 2002) but also saturated with normativity (Fourcade and Healy, 2007). What distinguishes moralized markets from ‘ordinary’ markets is their explicit morality. Thus, in these markets, morality is not one latent aspect among others but a key principle of market interaction, where market actors explicitly justify their production and distribution decisions with reference to moral principles (Stehr, 2015; Suckert, 2018). Strands within this body of research vary in that some focus on the process of market moralizing at different levels (Fourcade and Healy, 2007; Izberk-Bilgin, 2010; Stehr, 2015), while others analyze the distinct characteristics of markets that have become or are becoming associated with explicit morals (Balsiger, 2016; Suckert, 2018).

Within the field of marketing, several studies have examined processes that encourage consumers to act in more moralized ways in market contexts that were not initially explicitly moral (e.g. Coskuner-Balli and Ertimur, 2017; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014; Gollnhofer et al., 2019). Although not the primary focus of these studies, it is evident in them that the market-level processes they point to make morals more explicit in diverse markets. For instance, Giesler and Veresiu (2014) demonstrate how theorizations of responsible consumption as a moralistic identity project can never take for granted the process through which ethical consumers’ subjectivities are themselves created and adapted. Studies such as these help to illustrate the dynamic nature of explicit market moralization, and this work reinforces the contention that the explicitness of moral principles may vary across time and between markets. This helps explain why, even in markets that are not originally explicitly moralized, some degree of moralization can begin to occur as market participants’ awareness of specific moral principles becomes heightened (Giesler, 2008; Gollnhofer et al., 2019; Izberk-Bilgin, 2010; Luedicke et al., 2010).

Since digital technologies are increasingly redefining the structures and social interactions of markets (consider, for example, how digital platforms intermediate relationships between transacting partners), they may also have the potential to affect the moralization of markets (Corsaro and Maggioni, 2022; Parker et al., 2016; Zaki, 2019). To explore this possibility, and thereby go beyond prior work, we must consider the digital affordances that may matter to market moralization.

The concept of affordances, often applied in research on human/computer interactions (Gaver, 1991), is critical for understanding the relationship between technology and its users. As scholars have noted, affordances can be defined as ‘the mutuality of actor intentions and technology capabilities that provide the potential for a particular action’ (Majchrzak et al., 2013: 39). Affordance actualization refers to what an actor with agency does with a technology (Nambisan et al., 2019; Tan et al., 2016), and affordances are ‘neutral’ in actualizing behaviour for the agent’s ‘good or ill’ (Dennett, 2017: 79). Affordance theory offers ‘how come’ explanations about the rationality of the beliefs, desires or cognitive mechanisms of individual-level agents¹ (Elster, 1989).

Digital platform affordances actualize new types of communicative practices and social interactions that various platform features make possible (e.g. Barns, 2019; Bucher and Helmond, 2017). Particularly relevant to our work is research on social media platform affordances. A frequently cited classification of social media affordances separates social media affordances into

four groups (Treem and Leonardi, 2013). The first group, *visibility*, refers to making behaviours, knowledge, preferences and network connections that were once invisible (or at least very hard to observe) visible to others. As such, visibility makes markets more transparent but also affords different types of virtual displays of behaviour that may help undergird a certain moral belief. For instance, considering transparency as a form of visibility, Rodak (2020) demonstrates how food producers exploit social media to highlight ‘truths’ about their food production. Similarly, Abril et al. (2022) convey that the visibility of food photos serves to enhance participants’ images via self-presentation.

The second group of affordances includes those that enable *persistence*; this refers to making a communication continue to be accessible in the same form as the original display after the actor has posted that communication. To demonstrate how persistence leads to moral accountability and openness to public scrutiny, Zheng and Yu (2016) describe how a twitter-like microblogging platform (Weibo) is utilized to enroll the public in a nationwide charitable programme, illustrating how persistence affordances can strengthen and encourage support for moral convictions. Likewise, Mansour (2021) demonstrates how persistence plays an important role in facilitating member engagement in invisible asynchronous information activities (e.g. monitoring and searching) on Facebook.

The third group of affordances includes those that enable *editability*, meaning that individuals can craft and recraft a communication before it is viewed by others. Goodman and Jaworska (2020) illustrate how editability allows digital food influencers to construct, curate and share good and clean food as something that is equated with ‘the good life’. Due to the opportunity to censor and delete certain actions on social media, editability affordances may play a part in (re)constructing moral values. Likewise, Seidel et al. (2013) find that editability is relevant to implementing environmentally sustainable work practices.

Lastly, the fourth group of affordances enables *association*, which refers to associations that establish connections between individuals, between individuals and content, and between actors and presentations. Illustrating this, Kozinets et al. (2021) establish how contact and association enable the enforcement of morally grounded human rights such as protecting vulnerable consumers and ensuring product safety. Correspondingly, Tim et al. (2018) demonstrate how association affords groups of individuals the ability to cultivate collective commitment to and engagement in actions for environmental sustainability.

The above literature review indicates several intersections between social media affordances and market moralization. Inspired by these insights, we conducted an ethnographic inquiry of explicitly moralized local food markets that are supported by a social media platform. In the following section, we describe the research context and our methods.

Methods

Research context: REKO markets

Over the past 10 years, the Nordic local food phenomenon known as ‘REKO’² has grown from two markets in Finland (Jauho et al., 2019) to about 430 markets spread across 14 countries and three continents. The purpose of a REKO market is to establish a food market that offers local food producers an effective, direct and easy way to sell their food and that offers consumers easy access to those local food products. REKO markets are digitally supported in that intermediation is conducted by voluntary market administrators (admins) on a digital platform, in this case, Facebook. The admin role may be taken by both producers and consumers, and producers are often also consumers

and vice versa; thus, participants may take on multiple roles. The markets operate in both online arenas where products are advertised, purchased and paid for (Facebook groups) and offline sites where pre-purchased goods are physically distributed (typically a large parking lot). Online arenas also include multiple closed Facebook groups such as local producer groups, local admin groups and national groups for all participants.

There are three main premises of REKO markets, which reflect the REKO markets' shared principles regarding what constitutes moral products, moral market practices and moral participation. First, products should be local: it is required that advertisements are transparent about food origins and production methods. Second, to limit food waste and ensure sustainability, consumers and producers should practice pre-ordering. Third, to ensure economic fairness, consumers and producers should conduct exchanges without the intervention of intermediaries.

Data collection and analysis

We carried out ethnographic fieldwork over the course of 4 years. Depicted in [Table 1](#) is an overview of the data collected between spring 2018 and summer 2022. Following the recommendations of [Belk et al. \(2013\)](#), we set out to immerse ourselves in the full cultural complexity of the phenomenon of REKO markets by experiencing them as insiders. As such, the first author took an active approach to become an organizer in the REKO market community. This included taking an admin role in multiple markets, which resulted in almost daily contact with consumers, producers and other admins. Consequently, in addition to attending the delivery sites, the author gained access to REKO's various online national and regional forums, including producer and admin groups. This resulted in 500+ hours of fieldwork. To gain complementary insight into participant interactions within the REKO community, the second author spent 200+ hours as an active producer in multiple markets in the south of Norway.

Working iteratively, we applied common analytic practices of categorization, comparison and abstraction ([Grodal et al., 2021](#)). First, we combined the generation of the initial categories of platform features used by REKO participants during instances of moral deliberation about market

Table 1. Data collection overview.

Description	Source	Data set	Purpose of usage
Ethnographic participant observation (interviews, photos and video)	Informal interviews with consumers, producers and administrators during fieldwork	Field notes: 115 double-spaced pages, photos and video	Understanding the motives and behaviour of REKO participants
Facebook data	REKO forums: REKO producer group REKO Norway REKO national admin group REKO admin group REKO markets in southeastern Norway	453 entries	First-hand experience of the online practice of participants for embedded cultural understanding
Facebook group analytics	24 REKO markets in Norway	163 downloaded files	Statistical insights into participants' engagement and interactions

principles regarding products, market practices and participation. Refining these tentative categories, we merged and abstracted categories that could be interpreted as platform affordances. Through repeated iteration over selected instances where such platform affordances enabled market moralization, we defined superordinate categories of moral affordances. Both authors were attentive to potential differences in such affordances across the various online REKO arenas on Facebook.

Findings

Below, we present findings from our analysis that provide answers to our research question: *How do the affordances of digital platforms enable market moralization?* Specifically, we found that the digital affordances of social media platforms make possible four moral market affordances, labelled ‘moral meaning making’, ‘networked moral surveillance’, ‘moral sanctioning’ and ‘moral generative role-taking’, which play an important part in the moralization of markets. We elaborate on the nature of these moral affordances below.

Moral meaning making affordances

Generally, individual consumers are rarely in a position to significantly influence what sort of products are sold or to hold a moral standard in ways other than deciding to accept or reject what is offered. In REKO markets, however, consumers often question *what* is local and *what* is sustainable, as this can be debated and contested directly on the social media platform that hosts the market. Therefore, within digitally supported moralized markets such as REKO, social media affordances allow participants to engage in what can be described as moral meaning making; we find that *moral meaning making affordances* matter in the moralization of markets. Seidel et al. (2013: 1281) note that affordances that enable individuals to support and imagine meaningful alternatives to current solutions are those through which individuals may frame, interpret and, thus, understand the multilayered and complex issues related to their joint goals. This can be observed in the case of REKO markets, where only products consistent with the negotiated moral principles of what the participants consider local and sustainable are allowed to be sold. Illustrated in the following excerpt from the national REKO forum is a conversation between a consumer, a producer and an admin about whether locally produced food is necessarily associated with greater sustainability:

Consumer: I wonder where this idea that local food is environmentally friendly comes from? ... I think that if it is organic food then yes, but otherwise...?

Producer: “Local” means that you can order a rack of lamb from your local area instead of from New Zealand—a lot of CO₂ is wasted in that transportation.

Admin: By buying food from a REKO market, you are eating locally produced food: you help farmers, the local community and the environment. In addition, local food minimizes food waste. (National REKO group, 12 April 2020)

Here, the consumer is allowed to question one of the main moral principles undergirding the market: whether local food is necessarily more sustainable. In this example, the consumer believes that local food is only more sustainable if the food is organically produced. This national online arena permits a producer to reply to the consumer, explaining that local is inevitably associated with sustainability (because of lower fossil fuel emissions during transportation), and an admin to opine that local is not just valued because of sustainability but also because of supporting the regional

economy and minimizing food waste. This aligns closely with several studies emphasizing the complexity of what constitutes the ‘local’ in local food (e.g. Bentsen and Pedersen, 2020; Schermer, 2015). Taking place on the national REKO group page, the dialogue illustrated above is visible and accessible to any interested consumer, producer or admin in the REKO community. This resonates strongly with prior research that finds that visibility affordances (e.g. Rodak, 2020) enable the promotion of personal beliefs. Likewise, we find that when the platform enables moral meaning making, not only can it reinforce current moral principles, it can lead to the introduction of new interpretations of such principles or to the addition of new principles. An example of this is the idea that REKO should support smaller-scale farmers who are local (vs large volume producers who operate nationally); however, this idea can collide with the generic market principle that consumers should be allowed to make informed choices. The following excerpt is from the national REKO admin group:

Producer 1 (small-scale farmer): I see several markets selling eggs from volume producers, often from enriched cages [large cages with little room for movement]. This confuses consumers.

Producer 2 (small-scale farmer): REKO should be for those who sell most of their products directly to the consumer.

Producer 3 (volume producer): I thought that the whole idea of REKO was that consumers should be able to make their own decisions.

Producer 1: I think there should be a rule that says that if you are a volume producer, you have to write that in your advertisement.

Admin 1: I think the way to go is to have an easy rule that is easy to understand and that ensures transparent advertisements; that way, customers can get all the information they need in order to make their own decisions. (National admin group, 25 February 2020).

We find that visibility affordances enable participants to articulate explicit moral principles (here, whether REKO should be for small-scale farmers only) through the capacity for visible interactions such as liking, disliking, sharing and commenting on what is articulated. Moral meaning making is also facilitated by association affordances. The connections (being part of the REKO community) between these participants support the possibility of discussing and making sense of the moral principles embedded in the structure of the market. Ultimately, moral meaning making affordances may positively affect the moralization of the market as they may lead to resolving moral issues.

Networked moral surveillance affordances

Common practices in any market include communication practices, pricing practices and distribution practices. In traditional markets, most of the institutional work forming these practices takes place *outside* of the transactional marketplace (e.g. Baker et al., 2019). For example, in traditional markets, marketing communication takes place in separate channels from transactions, and pricing and distribution are not transparent. Contrastingly, in REKO markets, the monitoring and enforcement of practices that align with moral principles takes place *inside* the transactional marketplace. In REKO markets, the visibility afforded by the Facebook platform makes pricing transparent across markets: the principles for how products are priced – such as if prices allow small local organic farmers to cover their costs and make a small profit – are open to public scrutiny. Additionally, the principles behind how products are distributed are transparent to participants on

the platform, for instance, the principle that, to support sustainability, no products that are not pre-ordered are to be distributed during pick-ups. Thus, the shared and collective affordances enabled by the platform allow market participants to engage in what can be thought of as *networked moral surveillance*: market participants' ability to monitor multiple online market sites to ensure the moral conformity of market practices. As shown in the above instances, digital platform affordances, such as visibility, persistence and association, enable full threads of ongoing communication among market participants to be surveilled. A consequence of such surveillance is illustrated in the following post by a regional admin group:

New routines in our REKO markets

After many discussions and much feedback from consumers and producers... it has been decided that there will be a zero-tolerance policy for sales that are not pre-ordered. Those who are caught doing this will be removed from the market. (Regional producer and admin group, November 2019)

As reflected in this post, the many conversations that are visible in the various forums regarding what practices align with the moral principles of the market make it possible for the admins to collectively surveil whether their rules are being followed and to propose a 'zero-tolerance' policy for rule breakers. This is possible because admins also have access to arenas that are not available to everyone. Admins who are outspoken in challenging practices they view as immoral may seek to enforce rules that are consistent with their own ardent moral beliefs and, in this way, draw attention to what they consider moral practices. Thus, some participants can actualize the moral surveillance affordance not only to monitor the behaviour of other actors but also to punish them.

Moral sanctioning affordances

Social media platform affordances may enable what can be thought of as *moral sanctioning*, wherein market participants engage in imposing penalties aimed at ensuring that others adhere to certain moral principles. Influencing communication practices, REKO admins who believe that producers are not disclosing all true and relevant information in an advertisement or are misleadingly presenting how their products are produced can go beyond surveillance to intervention by taking down ads from those producers. This is illustrated by the following conversation:

Admin: We really need you [volume producer] to change your ad so that it is clear that you are a volume producer that sells to big grocery stores. Make it very clear that you are not organic and please remove "made with love and care". We get a lot of feedback from consumers that they don't like the "greenwashing" you guys are currently doing.

Volume producer: Why do I have to take away love and care?

Admin: It gives the wrong impression when you are an industrial producer that uses pesticides and chemical fertilizers to use words such as "with love and care" that indicate that you are a small-scale producer. Please change the ads if you want to sell in these markets. (Local admin group, Southeast Norway, 2018)

In this instance, the admin group agreed that the producer would not be allowed to post their ad in the market before the advertisement was totally transparent; the admin group also agreed that each member of the group would try to ensure that their rules were followed in other markets as well.

In digitally supported moralized markets, the affordances of visibility, editability, persistence and association together support what may be referred to as *moral sanctioning affordances*. Actualized, these affordances enable participants to collectively ensure that violations of moral principles are sanctioned, which may ultimately lead to moral compliance with the moral principles of the market.

Moral generative role-taking affordances

Research on moralized markets suggests that different actors may mobilize on behalf of different values (Fourcade and Healy, 2007; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014), such as environmental concerns, social justice or animal welfare (e.g. Constance and Choi, 2010; Fraser, 2008; Micheletti and Stolle, 2008). In traditional markets, actor roles are often well established and subject to the norms of the institutions that the actors represent. As institutional work to moralize markets often implies challenging these norms, it frequently takes place outside the marketplace without the support of and sometimes in direct opposition to the market institutions themselves (e.g. Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013)

While not all actors in digital moralized markets have equal opportunities to engage in advancing the moral principles they most value, the affordances of social media platforms can give some actors greater opportunities for *moral generative role-taking* (Majchrzak et al., 2013). Moral generative role-taking refers to the market-changing roles of actors operating in digital markets, such as establishing new markets, taking new intermediary roles or disintermediating (Autio et al., 2018). The following is an excerpt of a post by a producer in a REKO market in mid-Norway who is discontent with larger volume producers being allowed in the market:

Producer: I am going to start my own market. As opposed to this market, in the new market, only real small-scale producers will be allowed to join. Does anybody who lives nearby (local area) want to help me? (Regional producer/admin group, January 2019)

We find that digital platform affordances may ultimately (re)enforce some participants' additional power when they take on intermediary roles. This producer, who is clearly not content with how the moral principles of participation are being followed in the current market, actualizes the affordance of moral generative role-taking and appoints herself the admin of a new market that will be aligned more closely with her moral beliefs.

The digital platform also enables opportunities for moral generative role-taking by consumers because it enables action potentials that give consumers the capability to steer the market in their preferred moral direction. Within REKO markets, consumers may take on admin and/or producer roles through which they are better able to influence the markets from within. The following excerpt shows how a consumer, who initially took on an admin role in several markets with the moral conviction of REKO as a small-scale food-only market, advocates that REKO markets should only be allowed to sell non-food products if they are by-products of food production:

You can only sell by-products if you sell food from that very production. (Admin/consumer, regional REKO market, August 2018)

Interestingly, as her role changed from consumer to producer when she became a small-scale farmer herself, her moral opinion also changed, as illustrated in her alteration to the group description on the group page:

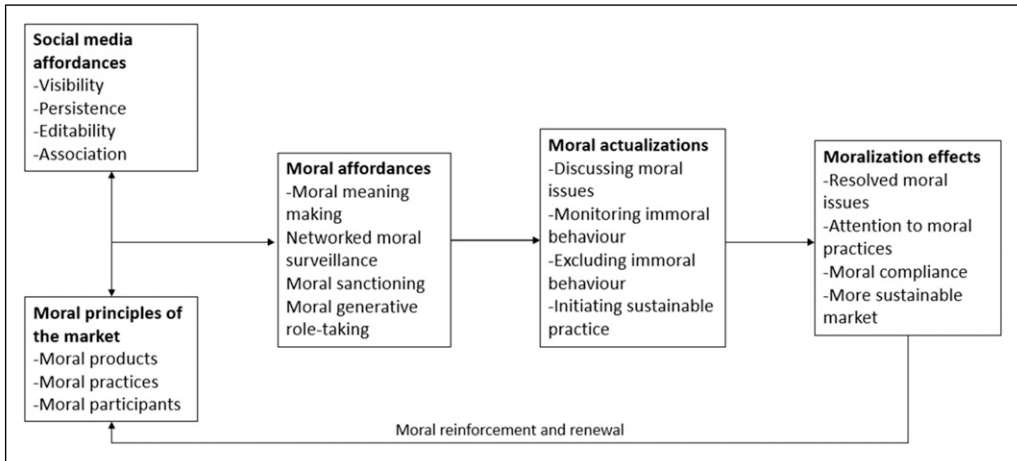


Figure 1. Market moralization process.

It is in the spirit of the small-scale farmer to take advantage of the resources from the whole farm and the whole animal. (Admin/producer, regional REKO market, October 2020)

As this example illustrates, market actors with access to the administrative affordances of the platform may take various roles that give them the power to decide whether other market actors are adhering to their own interpretations of the markets' moral principles, thereby ultimately shaping the markets to be in line with their own moral convictions. This resonates with prior research that demonstrates how individuals actualize the affordances of social media to develop and cultivate network-informed associations regarding environmental issues with which they themselves are concerned (Tim et al., 2018). Similarly, our analysis shows that social media affordances sustain moral generative role-taking affordances, which enable participants to dynamically adapt their practices contributing to a more sustainable market.

Illustrated in Figure 1 is our understanding of the market moralization process. Markets undergirded with explicit moral principles are typically concerned with the morality of the market's products, practices and participants. Aligned with prior research on social media affordances (Trem and Leonardi, 2013), our findings indicate that, enabled and conditioned by visibility, persistence, editability and association, digital platform affordances also enable participants to explore, elaborate and, partly, resolve moral concerns. We find that the actualization of moral affordances such as moral meaning making, networked moral surveillance, moral sanctioning and moral generative role-taking, may stimulate discussions of moral issues, the monitoring of immoral behaviour, the exclusion of immoral behaviour and the initiation of more sustainable practices. This may lead to moralization effects including resolved moral issues, attention to moral practices, moral compliance and more sustainable markets.

Finally, the actualization of moral affordances may ultimately reinforce and renew the moral principles of a market, constituting a market moralization feedback loop.

In the following discussion, we deliberate on the further implications of moral affordances beyond moralized markets and reflect on the possible negative effects of the actualization of moral affordances. We conclude by pointing to limitations and future research opportunities.

Discussion

Drawing on the case of REKO markets, we investigate the research question: *How do the affordances of digital platforms enable market moralization?* We identify four moral affordances (moral meaning making, networked moral surveillance, moral sanctioning and moral generative role-taking), and find that the actualizations of these moral affordances may reinforce and renew the moral principles of a market. In this way, our findings complement the negative focus on digital platforms in research on the moralization of markets.

Our findings point to two issues of relevance for consumer research on the digital moralization of markets: first, how digital platform affordances sustain moral affordances that initiate moralization in platform markets, and second, that moralization processes may affect markets both negatively and positively. We discuss each in turn below.

Implications beyond moralized markets: Market moralization in platform markets

Our work can serve to broaden discussions of how moral dilemmas that are based on participant differences in values such as equality, sustainability and fairness unfold when markets enter digital platforms or become extensively supported by social media. While REKO markets are based on explicit moral principles, markets with less explicit moral principles are also often populated with participants increasingly expressing their moral values in ways similar to those observed in our context (e.g. Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Dolbec and Fischer, 2015; Giesler and Versiu, 2014; Gollnhofer et al., 2019; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007).

This understanding helps draw connections between studies of explicitly moralized markets (Balsiger, 2021; Suckert, 2018) and studies that, albeit indirectly, have documented a moral-supporting role of social media affordances when it comes to, for example, equality within fashion (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013) or encouraging sustainability within the contexts of food consumption (Gollnhofer et al., 2019) or car sharing (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012).

In drawing attention to how the affordances of a digital platform make it easier for all market participants, including consumers and marketers, to partake in strengthening and reiterating the moral principles of the market, our work opens up considerations of how moral affordances may increase the likelihood of positive moralization outcomes. Market moralization feedback loops similar to the one we have observed in our study may, sustained by digital affordances, affect how the moral dynamics of both platform markets with explicit and those with less explicit moral foundations unfold. However, it must be acknowledged that moral affordances are ‘open to the variety of consumer behaviors’ (Kozinets et al., 2021: 429), and in and of themselves, they are ‘neutral’ in actualizing behaviour for an agent’s ‘good or ill’ (Dennett, 2017: 79). Indeed, actualizations of moral affordances may have both positive and negative consequences.

A double-edged sword: Actualization of moral affordances

Paradoxically, digital platform affordances may contribute to the maintenance of moralized markets but also to the diminution of moralization in markets. Although we argue that digital platform affordances may support the moralization of contemporary markets, we acknowledge that the actualization of moral affordances may have both favourable and unfavourable consequences. For example, findings related to both networked moral surveillance and moral sanctioning affordances can be compared and contrasted to prior research on how social media affordances impact the moralization of markets. For instance, other work has found that social media affordances, such as

visibility, editability, persistence and association, enable *surveillance* and *sanctioning*, which often have negative associations and negative outcomes, such as cyberbullying (e.g. Chan et al., 2019).

Research shows that digital platforms are complex and contingent creations of particular social, cultural and economic conditions that may both facilitate and restrict market formation and behaviour (Kozinets et al., 2021). Digital platforms may actually limit the type and amount of content that may be produced through network inequalities, commercial contexts, site architectures and algorithm uncertainties (e.g. Lee et al., 2019). This aligns with Treem and Leonardi's (2013) understanding of how social media affordances may shape members' perceptions and experiences depending on their own skills, knowledge and intentions. An important point is that moralization may be interpreted as persuading others to change their attitudes and behaviours surrounding an issue; consequently, moralization may unfold and result in negative consequences, such as intolerance for deviations from a moral norm undergirding a market or the stigmatization of non-conformers to particular moral norms (Huzzard and Östergren, 2002; Täuber, 2019).

A further potential negative side is the possibility of moral hypocrisy – that is, the motivation to appear moral, while, if possible, avoiding the cost of actually being moral (Batson et al., 2006). As discussed earlier, moralized markets may indeed be saturated with divergent norms and stakeholder identities (Balsiger, 2016), for example, when identities and visions are not shared or when conceptions and ideologies are diverse and possibly in conflict. Within local food markets, 'greenhushing' and 'greenwashing' are concerns that may be supported by digital affordances; these terms can be understood to mean over-communicating sustainability principles without conforming to truly sustainable practices (Font et al., 2017). It is therefore important to acknowledge that, although digital platform affordances may support the moralization of markets, moralization itself may put forward moral values that are not necessarily good for all market participants or for the market as a whole.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed how digital platforms may play an important part in supporting moralized markets. As such, we have focused especially on unpacking the nature of the digital platform affordances that matter for the formation and maintenance of such markets. We have found that moral dilemmas often come to light in markets underpinned with moral principles and that, enabled and conditioned by the affordances offered by digital platforms, particular moral affordances affect the moralization of such markets.

Our study also offers managerial implications for marketers who increasingly face the question of which platform(s) they should enter. Because digital platforms differ in their architectures, governance mechanisms and the affordances that may affect the balance between positive and negative moralization processes, our framework could assist marketers in choosing which platforms to enter to stimulate the positive outcomes of the moralization process that such entry is likely to trigger. Notably, because the affordance perspective applied in this study mainly explicates market behaviour on a digital platform without relying on particular explanatory assumptions of the individual market participants, further inquiries into the underlying actor intentions and technological capabilities at the individual level are called for.

Our analysis relies on the case of a certain type of contemporary digital local food market (REKO markets) and consequently comes with several contextual restrictions that may be remedied by further research. First, investigations into other sociocultural contexts could reveal other forms of moralized markets founded on other moral principles. Next, the REKO market model is organized in multiple online and offline arenas by multiple participant roles without the intervention of

middlemen. Due to this, investigations into the similarities and differences between the affordances of the offline and online arenas, as well as into the various actor roles, could generate additional insight into understanding market moralization.

This research focuses on how digital platforms may support the moralization of markets; for this reason, our attention is directed to the online arenas pertaining to these markets. Our main focus is on one market moralization-supporting factor in particular: how moral affordances are actualized on a digital platform. In this regard, further investigation into other dimensions of the digital transformation of moralized markets is warranted. For example, further inquiries into moral processes may further deepen the understanding of the formation and actualization of moralized marketplaces. We expect that digital platforms can support market moralization in varying ways across different contexts and cultures; for this reason, we hope that this work is one of many future works that will investigate how markets may be affected when market actors rely on digital platforms.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Professor Eileen Fischer for her valuable feedback and insights on various drafts of this article. We would also like to thank the three reviewers and the editorial team for their constructive comments and suggestions on this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Norges Forskningsråd (301428).

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Notes

1. Often termed ‘why’ explanations (Dennett, 2017).
2. REKO is an abbreviation for ‘rejält konsumtion’ which translates to ‘sincere/honest consumption’.

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