

# **Retail formations**

Tracing the fluid forms of an online retailer

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## Tracing the fluid forms of an online retailer

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# Retail formations

## Tracing the fluid forms of an online retailer

### Abstract

Change has often been said to characterise retailing, and research on retail change is extensive. However, though much of that research has focused on retail formats, it has not sufficiently addressed the fluid nature of retailing and how its formats emerge. This paper offers a more dynamic conceptualization of retail format change by introducing the concept of retail formation. Taking a constructivist market studies approach and drawing upon an ethnographic study of a Swedish consumer electronics retailer, the paper shows how retail formations are continually being made in a dynamic process that can be initiated by various actors, does not necessarily follow a logical order, and commonly produces unexpected results. The concept of retail formation allows us to better understand the increasing fluidity of retailing enabling us to trace complex market processes, examine multiple actors simultaneously, and taking into account the socio-historical and socio-cultural dynamics involved in shaping retail markets.

**Keywords:** Retailing, actor–network theory, retail formation, e-commerce, ethnography, fluidity

### Introduction

Change has often been said to characterise the world of retail (Brown 1987a), and academics and practitioners alike frame the retail industry as being in a constant state of transformation. Accordingly, retail seems to be a case in point of a world characterised by fluidity (Mol and Law 1994; deLaet and Mol 2000; Bauman 2000), and research on retail change is indeed extensive, as recent literature reviews have shown (Sandgren 2015; McArthur, Weaven, and Dant 2016).

A chief question addressed in such research is how retail formats evolve (e.g., McNair 1958; Hollander 1966; Gist 1968; Davidson, Bates, and Bass 1976; Markin and Duncan 1981; Brown 1987b; Evans, Barnes, and Schlacter 1993; Levy et al. 2005). Examples of such retail formats are department stores (e.g., Bucklin 1983), supermarkets (Appel 1972), and mail order (Coopey, O'Donnell, and Porter 1999). In general, retail formats have been depicted as experiencing specific phases, evolving as the result of conflicts among other retail formats, and in relation to their environments (Brown 1987a; Sandgren 2015; McArthur, Weaven, and Dant 2016).

Although the field has offered valuable insights into retail formats and their changeable nature, two issues are problematic. First, although studies have acknowledged and even focused on change in retail formats, they nevertheless reproduce a notion of the formats as rather stable, largely by depicting and studying them as entities with relatively distinguished boundaries and features. Retail formats are often approached from a distance in retrospective accounts of longer periods (cf. Reynolds et al. 2007), or with

a high degree of aggregation—that is, as a set of common patterns among large groups of retailers that share certain characteristics. At the same time, researchers also tend to examine retail formats once they have become relatively well known and stabilised (Davidson, Bates, and Bass 1976) instead of during their emergence, which is a time often characterised by greater flux and uncertainty (Dreesmann 1968). Consequently, though some researchers have problematised the notion of retail formats and argued that boundaries between different formats are becoming increasingly blurred in today's dynamic markets (McGoldrick 2002; Reynolds et al. 2007; Dawson and Mukoyama 2014), retail formats are typically depicted as fixed, fully formed market entities that change according to a logical pattern.

The second issue concerns the relationship between formats and individual retailers and the role it plays in retail change. In much of the literature on the topic, retail formats are conceived as distinct entities separate from the identity of specific retailers, and considerable effort has been put into the development of and calls for increasingly sophisticated definitions and classifications (cf. Hollander 1986; Savitt 1986; Brown 1987a; Dawson 2000). However, the classification approach to retail formats has been criticised in light of increasingly blurred boundaries among formats, as well as that retailers combine different formats and that formats and retailers indeed change over time (McGoldrick 2002; Reynolds et al. 2007; Dawson and Mukoyama 2014). As critics argue, the careful distinction and classification of retail formats also does little to explain such increasing fluidity.

In response to both issues, several efforts have been made to offer a more dynamic conceptualisation of retail formats and their relationship to individual retailers. Reynolds et al. (2007), for instance, proposed that retail practitioners turn to more practice-based notions of retail formats. Dawson (2005) and Dawson and Mukoyama (2014) have suggested the conceptualisation of a format and formula, in which the retail format is conceived of as a generic entity (e.g., hypermarket) and its specific versions (e.g., Tesco hypermarket) as a formula. Those later conceptualisations have acknowledged that both format and formula are subject to change and, more specifically, that each entity can affect the other. However, the ways in which that dynamic works and the changes it might precipitate have been neither theoretically nor empirically explored.

Against that background, the aim of this paper is to offer a more dynamic conceptualization and empirical illustration of retail format change. We introduce the concept of retail formation to direct attention to the activities and configuration processes involved in the formation of retail formats. Retail formations are here conceived of as configurations in the making that are continually reforming, shaped by different retail actors, and that also shape those and other actors. Using this concept we offer an account that does not take formats as givens, and does not assume a priori what or who causes change, or even that change has to occur in a given sequence.

In the following pages, we draw upon actor–network theory (ANT)-influenced market making theories and an ethnographic study of NetOnNet and the emergence of e-commerce in Sweden in order to describe, conceptualise, and explain retail formations. Our analysis traces three

instances of retail formation processes through which the NetOnNet network and its constitution, identity, and capacities change, as well as how such changes relate to the e-tailing retail format. With this analysis as its groundwork, the paper shows how retail formations are continually being made in a dynamic process that can be initiated by various actors, does not necessarily follow a logical order, and commonly produces unexpected results.

The paper is structured as follows. The first two sections introduce and contextualise our ANT-inspired theoretical and methodological approach to retail formation and, along the way, present central theoretical concepts and the method and material upon which the study draws. Thereafter, the analysis and discussion sections describe three instances of retail formations, each of which has resulted in the formation and re-formation of an actor-network with a specific identity and a set of capacities. In doing so, the principal points of those conceptualisations of retail formations are drawn out and contrasted with previous literature. Finally, we conclude by discussing how the notion of retail formations and the approach presented in this paper can be used to study retail in a fluid society, and how this conceptualization can contribute to the broader discussion of market formation and market dynamics.

## **Conceptualising retail formations**

As indicated in the introduction, this paper takes a constructivist market studies (CMS) approach (Araujo 2007; Kjellberg and Helgesson 2007; Harrison and Kjellberg 2016) and draws heavily on the conceptual resources of ANT (Latour 2005) to conceptualise retail formations. In doing so, we draw upon and contribute to an emerging field within market studies research (cf. Callon 1998; Callon, Méadel and Rabeharisoa 2002; Callon and Muniesa 2005; Kjellberg and Helgesson 2006; Araujo 2007; Kjellberg and Helgesson 2007; Callon 2016; Cochoy, Trompette, and Araujo 2016). Although a great deal of past research on markets has concentrated on highly regulated financial markets, a growing number of studies are interested in more 'mundane markets' (Kjellberg and Helgesson 2006) such as retailing. Callon and Muniesa (2005), for example, have discussed the multiplicity of configurations of retailing encounters such as supermarkets, shopping malls and e-commerce websites. Cochoy (2008, 2014) has explored the role that retail devices such as shopping trolleys and smartphones play in shaping retail and consumption practices. Similarly, Kjellberg and colleagues have investigated the formation and boundaries of market actors (Hagberg and Kjellberg 2010), how marketing theories are involved in the performing of retail markets (Kjellberg and Helgesson 2006), and how consumers shape retail exchange practices (Kjellberg and Stigzelius 2014).

In this paper, we aim to advance along those same lines. We draw upon previous literature to develop a CMS approach to retailing, and more specifically, the notion of retail formations. These formations are conceived of as configurations in the making that are continually reforming, shaped by different retail actors, and that also shape those and other actors. To begin, we define retail formation as *a dynamic process of configuring an array of*

*actors and market devices that specify a particular way of organizing transactions with consumers*<sup>1</sup>. In the following sections we will further elaborate on this notion.

In contrast with the idea of a “retail format,” as depicted in the previous literature, a retail formation as seen from a CMS approach is not considered to be a fixed entity with clear boundaries and essential properties (cf. Callon 1998; Canniford and Bajde 2016; Cochoy, Trompette, and Araujo 2016; Callon 2016). Thus, retail formations cannot not be taken as a given; on the contrary, they are made in practice, and are the result of the temporary stabilisation of a vast array of heterogeneous elements (Callon 1998; Hagberg and Kjellberg 2010). Accordingly, retail formations can be conceived ‘as provisional outcomes, as collectives, or networks of associated materials’ (Araujo and Kjellberg 2009: 207). Those associated materials are hybrid in the sense that they consist of both human and non-human elements (Callon 1998; Muniesa, Millo and Callon 2007). As a simple example, a supermarket consists of both the individuals who work there in the capacity of staff, and a vast array of devices, including display arrangements, shopping carts, and price tags, to name just a few (Cochoy 2008; Cochoy 2014; Fuentes 2014). By interlinking those different materials into an assemblage, the supermarket is constituted and acquires the capacity to perform its tasks of enlisting consumers and displaying its products. Thus, it becomes a configuration that intermediates and organises encounters between supply and demand (Callon and Muniesa 2005). However, the supermarket is one specific configuration out of a multiplicity of possible practical forms (Callon and Muniesa 2005).

The concept of a retail formation is not confined to include retailers, but also individuals with various titles (e.g., CEOs, investors, and researchers) or collectives of different sorts, including not only stores and retailers, but also, as we will discuss later, other types of actors such as consumers, trade associations, NGOs, media, and even regulations (cf. Mallard 2016). All of those entities, and possibly others, can be part of the retail formations created during and involved in the making of a retail market.

This dynamic reveals that what or who becomes part of a retail formation, or what that formation’s capacities might be, cannot be determined beforehand, but are instead a result of unfolding practices (cf. Hagberg and Kjellberg 2010). Therefore, although parties like NGOs, consumers, trade associations, computers and the media are not retailers, the above perspective holds that they can be involved in and exert influence over these formations (cf. Mallard 2016).

This concept is further refined by another key point: retail formation, much like assemblage, is a scalar concept and can therefore ‘be conceived on any scale’ (Roffe 2016: 43). It can consist of a few components with limited reach or be a vast global network of retailers (Kjellberg and Helgesson 2006). There is no fixed limit to the scale of retail formation, and as such, it makes equal sense to talk about a display counter, a retailer, or a retail industry as part of a retail formation (cf. Martin and Schouten 2014).

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<sup>1</sup> We thank one of our anonymous reviewers for contributing to this formulation.

In addition, and also central to this paper's discussion, retail formations are inherently fluid. Retail formations can and do change over time; they form and reform continuously, particularly in terms of which and how many elements are added to the network, how well interconnected those elements are, if at all, and how durable the associations among those elements are (Hagberg and Kjellberg 2010). For instance, a retail formation can develop from a mom-and-pop store to a large chain of retail stores that, in the process, expands to include more elements in the network. That chain of stores can be more or less interconnected and consist of more or less durable associations. For example, if all stores have the same owner and are not franchises, a more tightly connected network can be expected—one that is more standardised and has more durable associations.

Retail formations can also vary over time in terms of the identity and meaning ascribed to them. The perceived and ascribed function, role, goals, or objective of a retail network can change, as can the number of functions ascribed to a single retail actor. Moreover, the way in which that retail actor is perceived in relation to other actors—as a leader or laggard, central or marginal force, fierce competitor or collaborator—is prone to vary over time as the retail network forms and reforms. To continue the example used above, if a retailer grows from a small mom-and-pop store into a large chain, its identity is likely to change from that of a small, local, familiar shop to that of a large, multinational, corporate, and thus more anonymous business. Such development can in turn affect the possibility of ascribing certain qualities to the retail formation. For instance, consumers tend to more readily accept claims of sustainability from small, local stores than from large retail chains (Fuentes and Fredriksson 2016).

As the constitution and identity of a retail network changes, so will its capacities. The constitution of a retail formation will affect the actions that can be performed, the influence it can have on other actors and formations, and the reach it can have. For example, a brick-and-mortar store retailer has a reach limited chiefly to consumers in its immediate locale, the retailer can reform and become an e-tailer. By launching an e-tailing site, the retailer network can potentially reach consumers around the globe. To do so, however, it has to add elements to its network—not only an e-tail website, but also contracts with delivery firms and other necessary components needed to move goods beyond its immediate locale—and configure them to fit with other elements (e.g., consumers).

As previous studies have shown, the reconfiguration of retail formations is not necessarily deliberate, nor simply the product of chance. On the contrary, retail formations can re-form as a result of both 'explicit change efforts and ordinary actions' (Hagberg and Kjellberg 2010: 1029). In other words, retail formation can be the result of planned change processes, although change can never be planned in exceeding detail. However, it can also happen serendipitously via unplanned everyday actions.

The formation of retail networks can also occur at different speeds and is not necessarily organised into clear, logically following phases. The process can be gradual, with no clear beginning or end, and follow no discernible logic. At the same time, the formation of a retail network does not have to be initiated by only one type of actor—for example, by management or another

powerful actor as part of a strategic plan. Nor does it happen only as the result of broader developments in the market or in society. Instead, from an actor–network perspective, change can be initiated by any element in the network: a human or thing, a fully formed actor or merely an actant. Since agency is distributed in the network, so is the capacity to initiate change.

This dynamic means that although retailers or management can be initiators of change—either purposefully, by putting forward strategic action plans, or unintentionally—it is equally possible for change to be initiated at some position within the network. For example, consumers can initiate the re-formation of a retail formation (cf. McArthur, Weaven, and Dant 2016). From a CMS perspective, consumers are neither delimited to being receptors of offerings nor necessarily all-powerful makers of markets (Harrison and Kjellberg 2016). Instead, their role is far more complicated. Although consumers are not the omnipotent actors that they are sometimes portrayed to be in marketing research, they play a potentially important role in shaping markets. As Harrison and Kjellberg (2016) specify, consumers can shape markets via five interrelated processes: qualifying goods, modifying or initiating modes of exchange, configuring actors, establishing markets norms, and generating market representations. Applied to our discussion, this means that consumers can be agents of change who can initiate, support, and amplify retail formations in myriad ways. Consumers can change goods in some way—for example, by developing a product or participating in a product's marketing; they can initiate or modify the transactional infrastructure or script, for instance, by requesting new forms of delivery or demanding certain post-sales services; or they can equip themselves in different ways, for example, by using their smartphones as shopping tools. Consumers are thus potentially powerful actors capable of changing a retail network. The way change is accomplished and the extent to which they have agency, however, is an empirical question.

Conversely, it is important to keep in mind that retail formations are not generated solely in the retailer–consumer interplay. Other retailers, NGOs, media, and other organisations can be just as important, if not more important, as agents of change. Such agents also do not have to be human; an artefact, idea, law, policy, or label can work as an agent of change, namely by reorganising the practices of retailers and remaking their assemblage. As a case in point, Mallard (2016) traces the history of reforms of retail implementation in France over a 40-year period and in the process highlights the important role that laws can play in shaping retail networks, as well as how various actors—distributors, political actors, and legislators, to name a few—become entangled in shaping retail markets.

Given all of the network variations and possible agents of re-formation, the fact that retail formations change over time comes as no surprise — and in fact is to be expected (cf. Kjellberg, Azimont, and Reid 2014).

In sum, the above conceptualisation of retail formations helps to expand the current understanding of retail formats and enables us to address them from their process of emergence. Retail formations are continually formed and re-formed, a process that can be initiated by any element in the network; that can be deliberate or unplanned and happen at different speeds; and does not have to follow a discernible logic. In turn, the question of how



retail formats are made can be addressed by tracing and investigating the processes of retail formation. The chief questions here are twofold: What initiates and enables processes of retail formation, and how do retail formations vary in terms of configuration of elements, identity, and set of capacities?

In the following paper, we trace three instances of retail formation to show how the e-tailing format is remade in and through the activities of a specific retail actor—namely, NetOnNet—and the way in which e-tailing becomes an actor that plays an important role in the formation of NetOnNet as an actor–network. This account demonstrates the dynamic configuration process of retail formation in which the retailer NetOnNet and the e-tailing format are temporary outcomes.

## Method and materials

The paper draws empirically upon an ethnographic study of a Swedish online retailer conducted by the first author during 2001–2008 (Hagberg 2008, 2010). Informed by ANT, the study takes a constructivist perspective, which assumes that reality is constantly constructed and that change is continuous (Callon 1986; Latour 1987; Latour 2005; Czarniawska 2008). In line with the theoretical perspective outlined above, this view stipulates studying how something *becomes*, not what something *is*, and studying the construction rather than the essence of a phenomenon.

Per the ANT methodological imperative, we sought to ‘follow the actors’ (Callon 1986; Latour 1987, 2005). According to this approach, an actor and other entities can together be seen as a network of associations among heterogeneous elements (e.g., humans, things, concepts, and ideas). Thus, ANT upholds a method that traces the associations by which actors and other entities are constructed and reconstructed. Central to the ANT-inspired method is what has been called the *symmetrical approach*, in which both human and non-human entities are treated as potentially powerful actants (Callon 1986; Latour 2000, 2005). Instead of understandings, interactions, or discourses, what matters in ANT is tracing a process of material–semiotic construction: the interlinking of humans and non-human entities, the forging of associations among various types of entities, and the effects of those associations (cf. Bruni 2005).

The empirical material consists of a combination of interviews, observations, and archival materials. In sum, 23 interviews were conducted with NetOnNet managers across different functions of the company; suppliers; and other partners (e.g., trade organisations) during 2001–2006. Observations were made of the company website and the company’s warehouse stores and documented in photographs, field notes, screen shots, and a collection of artefacts. Archival materials, including investment memorandums, annual reports, interim reports, sales reports, press releases, and letters produced by the company were collected, as were newspaper articles covering NetOnNet and the emergence of e-commerce in Sweden. Reports were also gathered from different authorities and research organisations in which NetOnNet is a member, including the Swedish

Competition Authority, the Swedish Consumer Agency (SCA), and the Market Court.

The analytical categories presented in the following subsections were developed as a result of close readings of the material (i.e., interview transcripts, field notes, photographs, documents, and the website), the use of common coding techniques, and the constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Crang and Cook 2007).

Informed by the theoretical framework presented above, categories were constructed and relationships among them formulated while the material was read, chiefly to identify distinct instances of retail formation in the case of NetOnNet. We sought to first describe how the constitution of elements changed, what that change meant for the identity of the retail network, and how such changes affected its capacities.

Analysis resulted in the construction of shorter case narratives based on the longer empirical account of the longitudinal study that informs the paper (Czarniawska 2004). That process prompted us to write three distinct sections that contain a narrative from the case, followed by a discussion in relation to a specific analytical theme.

## **NetOnNet and retail formations**

In the following, we provide an account of NetOnNet and the emergence of three instances of retail formations, from the start of the company and throughout its first years of operation. The story begins in fall 1998 in Sweden, where, as in many parts of the world, new companies were launched at a rapid pace to sell various forms of goods and services on the Internet. The launch of companies such as CDNow, Amazon, and eBay in the United States in the mid-1990s had parallel startups in Sweden; however, those attempts went relatively unnoticed in Sweden until late 1997, when a company called Boxman launched to sell CDs, movies, and video games online. Compared to previous efforts to launch online companies in Sweden, Boxman communicated high ambitions from the start. Its stated aim was to attain a 50% share of the CD market in Nordic countries in five years by selling at 20–50% below the price in physical stores. The company was backed by renowned investors and received outstanding media attention, and the crash of the website on launch day due to high traffic was yet another sign of its success. Media reported on the hectic tempo in the company and reported that it was all about high speed, international expansion, and high investments. Those and other media outlets also cited Boxman as representative of new Internet companies, the e-tailing boom, and a future that would change so fast that old companies would lag behind and eventually go out of business. This moment signaled the height of the e-tailing hype in Sweden, and the launch of Boxman was followed by the efforts of other startups with similar ideas for other types of products and services. Among those startups was NetOnNet.

## **NetOnNet and the e-tailing boom**

In its first formation, the relationship between NetOnNet's formation and the e-tailing format was one of alignment. Although NetOnNet's enactment of e-tailing was specific, it was considered to be, and was also intended to be, typical of other e-tailing efforts at that time. In short, NetOnNet's retail formation followed a template. Being an e-tailer at that time in history came with a set of qualities and meant being and operating in a certain way. NetOnNet's formation worked to mimic those traits, and it added elements that it reorganised to produce an e-tail network. In the process, the capacities of its formation also changed, and it became a different kind of actor.

### ***E-tail and consumer electronics***

In the office of a consumer electronics wholesaler in 1998, three people discussed the market for consumer electronics in Sweden in relation to the Internet. Each had a background in in-store consumer electronics retail and had considered selling to consumers directly for a long time. However, none wanted to start a new store retail chain and considered mail order catalogues to be too inflexible for consumer electronics, particularly given their short product life cycles and price fluctuations. Instead, they contemplated a new kind of business opportunity. They were well aware of Boxman and other e-tailer starts in Sweden and had noted that none of those startups focused on consumer electronics. They saw an opportunity and founded NetOnNet, a retailer dedicated to selling consumer electronics online.

To be first on the market was considered vital for success, because it would generate media coverage and the opportunity to 'build consumer relations before competitors' and 'grow with the market'. The months that followed would be characterised by a sense of urgency as the founders worked at a frantic pace to develop and launch the website.

### ***An e-tailer startup: Building the website***

NetOnNet's website was built with the help of a local advertising agency using standard software for online stores. Text, pictures, and prices were uploaded for the products, together with the layout of a homepage that would invite visitors into the web store. The recruitment of visitors would occur through a specific web portal, which at the time hosted many new online stores in Sweden. The launch of the website in early March 1999 was preceded by press releases and advertisements on the web portal.

Like Boxman's site, NetOnNet's website crashed on its inaugural morning. This failure required a switch to a new server and the development of a new website that could handle more visitors. In any case, the crash was a sign of success. At the time, a server crash demonstrated that the related product was in high demand, and crashes were typical of new hyped e-tailers (e.g., Boxman). Despite the failures of launch day, NetOnNet could be called Sweden's first online store in consumer electronics. Later, its staff discovered that NetOnNet could even be considered the first of its kind in Europe. However, in order to draw more visitors and have a website that could handle them, NetOnNet's founders needed more capital and thus set out to recruit investors.

### ***Attracting new capital, attracting new visitors?***

Once the founders developed an investment proposal, they began to look for potential investors. They soon came into contact with a media investor, with whom they devised a new investment proposal with revised ambitions concerning NetOnNet's development. The media investor deemed it vital to express high ambitions in order to be able to attract capital, and the revisions included a doubled revenue goal and significantly increased losses for the first five years of operation. With the help of the memorandum, the team managed to recruit a group of renowned investors connected to several well-known e-tail startups. This partnership increased the team's ambitions all the more. With the new capital in place, NetOnNet's website was rebuilt, and a new press release drafted.

In addition to replacing the website, the company used the capital for print advertisements, promotional giveaways, and loss leaders. It was important to attract visitors to the website and recruit members to NetOnNet, as other e-tailers at the time were doing. (These e-tailers consequently reported development in the number of visitors, albeit not in profits or even turnover.) In addition to the website's ability to host visitors, NetOnNet hoped that the site would convert them into members. One campaign to recruit members involved giving away videotapes to visitors who registered as members. All told, the capital was spent rapidly, and new plans for a larger issue of shares started to take form in early 2000. As a result, an investment bank helped the investors to develop a new investment memorandum, one which described the online market as being in a state of hyper-growth.

### ***NetOnNet as a high-tech global e-tailer***

Interestingly, the proposal described NetOnNet as an e-tailer and differentiated e-tailing from store-based retailers and mail order companies. On the one hand, according to that description, store-based retailer chains were heavily invested in fixed costs and viewed the Internet as a problem because it cannibalised their physical stores. The proposal also pointed out that store-based retail chains have inflexible assortments of inventory, limited opening hours, and circumscribed geographical catchment areas. On the other, it stated the mail order companies were sluggish, stuck in structures necessitated by the physical catalogue, inflexible due to catalogue lead times, and had high operational costs. By contrast, e-tailers such as NetOnNet could offer a large assortment of products without the restrictions of a physical store or catalogue, had lower fixed costs, were more cost efficient, imposed no geographical limitations, and could collect consumer data for more specialised offers. However, the benefits of e-tailing would become evident only with growing sales volume, as illustrated in a diagram of sales volume and profit that showed sharper curves for typical e-tailers than traditional retailers. The typical e-tailer would lose far more money than traditional retailers at a lower sales volume; however, with higher sales volumes, the profit would increase far more rapidly. At the same time, in order to grow volume at rapid pace and obtain first-mover advantages in different markets, there was an emphasis on the need for rapid, substantial expansion abroad, which could also be facilitated by the relative insignificance of geographical location that characterises e-retailers.

In the short term, volume was vital, and growth and speed therefore needed to be prioritised instead of profit. According to the proposal, NetOnNet was supposed to use the new investments for rapid global expansion. The budgeted revenues for the first year (i.e., 2000) were five times more than those on the previous memorandum, due to that year's expansion from Sweden to Denmark, Norway, Germany, and other European countries. Expected losses were also considerable: from 6.5 MSEK and 13.6 MSEK in the first two memorandums to roughly 90 MSEK for 2000, which was equivalent to estimated revenues for the same period. Also contrary to the previous memorandums, no prognosis was given for the years that followed, except that significant negative results were expected in 2001. On 12 April 2000, NetOnNet announced that the rights issue had been resolved and that rapid expansion would follow. However, in the last few months, once-minor signs increasingly suggested that something might imminently change the course of e-tailing.

### ***The formation of a typical e-tailer***

In the first formation described in the previous section, NetOnNet formed as an e-tail company, one that adopted and translated the e-tailing format as understood and enacted in its particular in place and time: Sweden in the late 1990s. In that setting, this version of e-tailing was exceedingly specific. An e-tailer was expected to be high tech, fast moving, flexible, innovative, efficient, unbounded by physical structures and geography, and low cost. Also typical of e-tailers was rapid growth, global expansion, and, more notably, heavy losses. E-tailing was the retail format of the future and assumed to be superior to more traditional formats.

NetOnNet set out to enact these qualities during its first formation, and use them as a blueprint in creating the particular configuration that would enable NetOnNet to attain the identity and capacities of an e-tailer. Importantly, that blueprint involved attracting investors and capital, creating a website, forming contracts with third-party movers, and generating media hype. It also entailed writing documents, making ambitious plans for global expansion, and enacting so-called 'pure' e-tailing by distinguishing e-tail from traditional retail and mail order, chiefly by arguing that those formats were old sluggish, and high cost.

As the story above illustrates, the retail formation effort was successful in many aspects. NetOnNet became a typical e-tailer able to generate media attention, attract investors, build a functioning web store, and expand rapidly in terms of site visitors and members. It bore the expected configuration of elements, achieved the identity of an e-tailer by itself, and gained the capacities deemed typical of contemporary e-tailers. NetOnNet's enactment of e-tailing thereby became a local, specific enactment of e-tailing, yet also a typical version of it insofar that it did not deviate, nor sought to deviate, from how e-tailing was enacted by other retail actors. NetOnNet drew upon the hype of e-tailing, put that label to work, and concurrently became an enactor and promoter of e-tailing in its first formation.

## **NetOnNet and the dot-com crash**

In the second part of the story, we describe how NetOnNet's identity as an e-tailer became problematic, as well as the capacities and configurations associated with e-tailing. It shows how NetOnNet engaged in discussions about what e-tailing was and is and how it resembles and differs from other formats. The construction of its identity was accompanied by a reconfiguration of its network, adding new associations and dissolving others, as well as by a shift in capacities.

As we show below, in this second retail formation, the relationship between NetOnNet and the e-tail format changed. NetOnNet was no longer preoccupied with aligning itself with the format, which, in a sense, had already been accomplished. Instead, NetOnNet worked to specify, modify, and defend e-tailing as it came under increasing criticism during the dot-com crash and its fallout.

### ***Future winners: E-tailers, mail order, or retail chains?***

An important assumption in the startup of NetOnNet was that e-tailers would be able to offer products at lower prices due to a lower cost of operations than store-based retailers and mail order companies. However, in late 1999, a retail institute issued a report on price comparisons among e-tailers and store-based retailers that received considerable media attention. Contrary to the assumptions and claims of e-tailers, the report showed that prices were lower at store-based retailers if the cost of freight were included. Another issue emerged in late 1999: the media reported that many e-tailers faced problems with delivery. One e-tailer's failure to deliver Christmas trees in time for Christmas received particular attention.

In January 2000, a debate emerged in business media among representatives of different companies, researchers, and trading associations, one of whom was the CEO of NetOnNet. The debate originated in a paper by researchers who claimed that e-tailers had underestimated the cost of operations and had incorrectly created the impression that the costs for consumers would be lower with e-tail, even if delivery costs were included. They argued, by contrast, that the costs of operations would increase significantly with the overseas expansion in which many e-tailers were currently involved. They also claimed that mail order companies would be the probable winners of the competition between mail order companies, retail stores, and e-tailers since they had already developed an infrastructure that would also allow them to provide e-tail.

The debate focused on whether pure e-tailers would reap the advantages or whether those benefits would instead be enjoyed by mail order companies and store-based retailers that combined their businesses with online sales. The CEO of NetOnNet joined the debate by claiming that mail order would not prevail since catalogues lacked flexibility, but that e-tailers nevertheless had much to learn from mail order companies and other traditional retailers. Representatives of a mail order association and mail order companies also participated in the debate by stressing that they had the experience and structure that would enable them to lead development, whereas e-tailers had insufficient operations, logistics, and customer service, and used third-party providers without having sufficient knowledge. The

debate persisted in business media during the months that followed, although new problems soon emerged for e-tailers.

***Revising plans: The new NetOnNet model takes shape***

A couple of days after the completion of NetOnNet's private placement, the Swedish business press reported that stock prices in the United States had fallen rapidly. Apparently, a crisis for e-tailing companies loomed, one that threatened heavy losses and an consequent inability to attract investors. Swedish stocks followed suit, and reports abounded that e-tailers indeed faced considerable problems with delivery, rising expenses, and only modest revenues. In May 2000, the board of Boo.com, one of the most famous e-retailers in Sweden, filed a petition for bankruptcy, and the crisis of e-commerce became evident to the general public. Many e-tailers that had planned for further capital injections now faced the difficulty of attracting new capital, which critically undermined their plans to continue overseas expansions. In short, their expenses were accumulating as they sought to achieve rapid growth in line with their proposals for existing capital investments.

In summer 2000, NetOnNet's situation had completely changed in relation to the memorandum and the subsequent rights issue. The former plan, including a new capital injection into NetOnNet finances during 2001, now appeared impracticable. Prompted by the new situation, previous plans were significantly revised, and many of NetOnNet's previous ambitions—such as its European expansion—were modified. Taken together, the new plans were supposed to lead to profitability, thereby making additional capital injections unnecessary.

At the end of the summer, the company communicated the revised plans, including a 'NetOnNet model' involving various elements. All company activities would focus on creating consumer transactions. While the previous investment memorandums emphasised the recruitment of members, that goal was now abandoned in favour of an emphasis on revenue generation. Thus, while the number of members was previously an important indicator, the reporting of that figure was soon abandoned along with activities to recruit members. Industry knowledge was considered to be vital among the company's current and future staff, and overseas expansion was discontinued. The company would instead focus on low costs, to which end logistics, a core activity, would be done in-house. Furthermore, high-order value was deemed more essential than ever before. The company focused on controlling and monitoring operations and shifted its key performance indicators toward the cost of recruitment per customer and away from website visitors.

***Going after suppliers: Initiating an association and putting it to work***

Although it had been clear from the start that NetOnNet would eventually sell private labels, it was now considered vital to offer product brands similar to those of store-based competitors, including Panasonic, Philips, and Sony. The original plan was that when NetOnNet was established as a brand, private labels would be introduced into their offerings. However, it had proven difficult to form contracts with suppliers; although the company managed to secure contracts with some of the most well-known brands, the brands

usually stipulated prices for NetOnNet higher than those they stipulated for NetOnNet's store-based competitors who had higher sales volumes.

In the wake of the dot-com crash, problems with the supply of goods became even more apparent. Some suppliers refused to sell products, and some of the prices were too high for NetOnNet, which made it impossible for them to offer prices lower than those of store-based competitors. To put more pressure on suppliers, NetOnNet initiated the formation of the Swedish E-Commerce Association (SEA) as a means of mobilising other e-commerce companies facing similar problems. The CEO of NetOnNet became the chairperson of the association that soon consisted of 15 other pure e-tailers. The association's launch announcements declared that the association would chiefly aim to address supply refusals, which, according to the CEO of NetOnNet, was an important problem for e-tailers in general.

The association initiated a survey of Swedish e-tailers concerning their experiences with supply refusals and price discrimination. On the basis of the survey, NetOnNet complained to the Swedish Competition Authority in a report claiming that Swedish consumers paid unnecessarily exorbitant prices for products, caused by suppliers' price discrimination and supply refusals. Speaking not only on the behalf of NetOnNet, but also for e-tailers in general, the CEO of NetOnNet claimed that, taken together, the problems meant that e-tailers were restricted from accessing the benefits that the format enabled but that access could contribute to general price decreases, which would in turn benefit Swedish consumers. However, the Swedish Competition Authority summarised in a subsequent report that it had received only a handful of complaints concerning e-tailers, but that there were nevertheless reasons to investigate the issue further. Apart from that action, however, not much more was heard. Of the original 15 members of the SEA, few now remained, for many had suffered the same fate as other e-tailers: closure and bankruptcy.

### ***Attacking stores: Advertising the cheapness of e-tail***

Before the dot-com crash and with the help of early investments, NetOnNet had already used print advertising, which focused on products and prices. However, market surveys performed by other parties indicated that few consumers knew about NetOnNet. In fall 2000, NetOnNet thus initiated a new marketing campaign, which combined TV commercials, print, and Internet advertising. Instead of focusing on products and prices, the new advertisements underscored the differences between buying online and in physical stores. The advertisements depicted situations in which people experienced problems with carrying their goods home and displayed price differences between the higher amounts that they paid in stores versus what it would cost from NetOnNet. The campaign was the start of several advertisements that exploited the marketing techniques used by traditional store-based competitors, including price guarantees, loss leaders, and various discounts, with the common theme that it would be cheaper for consumers to buy online.

In their efforts to convince consumers that it was cheaper to buy online, NetOnNet identified an obstacle that consisted of so-called price guarantees provided by store-based retailers. Such guarantees meant that customers



would be reimbursed if they found a similar product at a lower price at any competitor. According to NetOnNet, however, competitors refused to compensate customers when the comparison was based on prices among e-tailers, even if that was not stated in the conditions. Following correspondence between the SCA and store-based retailers, the retailers specified the condition that price guarantees would also include comparisons with e-tailers. However, they added that all costs, including those of delivery, should be considered in the comparison. After such pledges, the SCA closed the case. According to the SCA, the guarantees could well be restricted to physical stores as long as that stipulation was clearly stated in the conditions of the guarantees. In the wake of the dot-com crash, NetOnNet commissioned a researcher to investigate the effects of price guarantees and filed a new complaint to the SCA with the researchers' report enclosed to show the general implications of the guarantees. One competitor had included a restriction upon e-tailers because the company found that some consumers had abused the guarantees by establishing their own websites and offering prices at almost no cost, which forced changes to the guarantees, including that they were invalid in relation to e-tailers and concerned local stores only.

### ***Last e-tailer standing***

As the dot-com crisis worsened, many pure e-tailers vanished, including Boxman and nearly all of the original members of SEA. While NetOnNet emphasised how it differed from many typical e-tailers in terms of experience, cost focus, and reasonable expansion plans, it remained a pure e-tailer nonetheless. Soon, NetOnNet started to benefit from gradually higher sales as the number of online consumers grew. Increased sales started to become apparent in fall 2000 and rose sharply around Christmas 2000, thereby justifying the company's faith in online retail. Despite the public discourse around e-retailing as a hyped-up flash in the pan and a failure, it seemed that e-tail still had a future.

### ***From hype e-tailer to a traditional (r)e-tailer***

As the second part of the story shows, the e-tailer hype gave way to the dot-com crash, which meant that an identity as a e-tailer, as portrayed in previous media hype, became problematic for NetOnNet. E-tailers were seen as inexperienced, lacking the proper infrastructure, unreliable, not cheaper, and unprofitable. The characteristics previously associated with the e-tail format could not be sustained. Being an e-tailer was now a drawback, and the sole antidote was re-formation. A new version of NetOnNet thus evolved, this time in the form of a traditional (r)e-tailer. On the one hand, the re-formation involved differentiation from the typical e-tailer by becoming more like a traditional retailer: experienced, cost effective, reliable, and profitable. On the other hand, it involved differentiation from traditional retailers by being cheaper. Thus, differentiation also involved identification; the creation of differences also required the establishment of similarities in other regards (cf. Cochoy 2004).

As this new version of NetOnNet took form, it implied a changing configuration. New plans were formulated, new press releases were written, resources were now allocated primarily to operations in Sweden, and global

expansion was put on hold. New associations led to a configuration that differed from the one previously discussed.

Not only did NetOnNet acquire a new identity and configuration, but the capacities of the actor–network also changed. The new retail formation was not as apt at attracting investor capital and visitors; instead, its focus was enlisting customers and generating revenue. The reflexive capacity of NetOnNet was made possible with the timing of capital investments, which enabled the company to transform from a hyped-up e-tailer format and into a more traditional (r)e-tailer just as the economy and public perceptions of e-tail were changing.

At this point, another issue became apparent. Not only was retail formation shown to be a fluid process in which a retail actor–network is in a continuous state of re-formation, but that re-formation was also intimately connected to surrounding developments (i.e., movements in other networks). In NetOnNet's case, re-formation occurred right as the dot-com boom turned into the dot-com crash.

This dynamic is not the same as a company's adaptation to its surroundings, for that explanation is too simplistic. Instead, it is a question of co-development. As NetOnNet re-formed and enacted this new identity, it also played a role in shaping other related formations. By transforming its e-tailer identity, it also contributed to the sophistication of the format of e-tailing as understood and enacted at the time. NetOnNet evolved from working to reproduce the e-tailing format to specifying, modifying, and defending it. It went from aligning with and re-enacting the hyped e-tailer version to enacting another version: that of the traditional (r)e-tailer.

### **NetOnNet and noncompliant consumers**

Around Christmas 2000, when many new customers had enrolled and sales were increasing rapidly, NetOnNet found it increasingly difficult to deliver products. Since problems with delivery ranked high among explanations for the failures of other e-tailers, they became a particularly important issue to NetOnNet to resolve.

Another set of problems arose when the company had to manage an increasing order volume, including issues with customer service and returns. Local customers even started calling NetOnNet's customer service to ask whether they could pick up their purchases themselves at the company warehouse. That way, they could avoid shipping costs and obtain the products immediately.

Seeking to be customer oriented, NetOnNet responded to such demands by allowing customers to pick up their purchases. However, the new policy prompted numerous problems when customer pick-ups started to interfere with the regular shipment of goods. Although issues concerning regular shipment were resolved before Christmas, they catalysed new, protracted negotiations with customers and, in turn, another re-formation of the NetOnNet actor–network. In the third retail formation NetOnNet did not simply reproduce what had become known as e-tailing, nor modify or defend it, but rather remade it, by crafting a version so different that it could even be conceived as separate from its predecessors.

### ***The launch of warehouse shops and the catalogue***

In the aftermath of the Christmas rush, NetOnNet's management discussed ways to address customers who wanted to collect goods at the warehouse. Realising that they could not continue to uphold the ad hoc policy, they sought to develop a more permanent solution. Eventually, a small area with computers was built that connected directly with the warehouse. There, customers could place orders, pay at the counter, and walk over to the dock to collect their purchases. Advertisements announcing the warehouse's inauguration stressed that it was not a regular store, but something different.

As sales from the warehouse ramped up, so did the number of in-person customers, which thus required an expansion that would circumvent spatial limits on business growth. Soon, ideas about launching a separate store circulated, as did thoughts about relocating the warehouse and opening a separate shop near the warehouse. Possible locations were discussed, and the optimal spot was determined to be the town of Ullared, a major shopping destination in Sweden. Thus, NetOnNet launched a warehouse shop in Borås and another one in Ullared in 2002.

At around the same time, NetOnNet also launched a 116-page catalogue: a surprising move given previous discussions and comparisons of e-tailing to mail order. The idea was that the catalogue would be handed out in the warehouse shops and sent to customers who placed online orders. Management hoped that the catalogue would function as a impetus for visitors at the warehouse shop to order online later, and it thus contained detailed instructions on how to shop on NetOnNet's website. Along with launching the catalogue, NetOnNet also applied for membership to the Swedish Mail Order Association. Originally founded by NetOnNet, the SEA had dissolved, and most of its old members were no longer in business. After some mandatory tests of its operations, NetOnNet was approved and became a member—in fact, one of the first e-tailers in its ranks, meaning that the association could now even represent new e-tailers. Although the company soon abandoned the catalogue, it remained a member of the organisation for some time. Eventually, more and more e-tailers joined the association, and a growing share of sales among mail order companies occurred online. In 2006, the organisation changed its name to Swedish Distance Sellers and, in 2014, to Swedish Digital Commerce.

### ***Still an e-tailer?***

The launch of the warehouse shops received considerable media coverage and prompted questions about whether NetOnNet was planning to abandon online retail and, in turn, whether its bowing out would prove once and for all that e-tailing was not the way of the future. However, NetOnNet maintained its e-tail identity, citing that its online business was the foundation of the company and had enabled the warehouse shops that operated as a mere extension of the web store.

A few years later, the company opened several more warehouse shops around Sweden. The first of them opened in Malmö in 2006, with an area of 4,800 m<sup>2</sup>—nearly double the size of the two previous warehouse shops in Borås and Ullared. The opening of the store was heralded by advertisements

in the local newspaper, and on the morning of the opening, consumers had queued outside. In the parking lot were representatives of Elgiganten, the largest store retail chain in Sweden, who distributed leaflets comparing NetOnNet's advertised prices with the lower ones offered by Elgiganten at their nearby store, as well as a coupon for that store.

Together with other examples of e-tailers that had established physical stores, the media took the opening of new warehouse shops as evidence that e-tail could be conducted only in combination with physical stores. NetOnNet's store-based competitors indeed provided a combination of physical stores and online retail, and one article took a further step of averring that NetOnNet's establishment of warehouse shops exemplified how online retailers were abandoning their original business idea. Invited to comment on the development, NetOnNet's CEO stated that NetOnNet was proud to be the first consumer electronics e-tailer in Sweden, but that the company was even prouder of materialising the Internet. He added that it was dangerous to think about online retailing as 'pure' and that NetOnNet was not a traditional store-based retailer, a pure e-tailer, or anything like its store-based competitors, even the ones that sold online. NetOnNet, he argued, represented the concept of the future: a specific combination of physical and online retail.

Since then, the number of online retailers in consumer electronics has increased significantly, while traditional store-based retailers have developed an online presence, and new e-tailers of consumer electronics have emerged. In an increasingly crowded market, NetOnNet has continued to emphasise the uniqueness of its hybrid online-cum-warehouse concept. NetOnNet's warehouse shops continued to launch, and in February 2016, the company announced the opening of its sixteenth location. Although the hybrid concept was initially questioned, today it is an accepted concept in Swedish retail.

### ***The formation of a retail hybrid***

In NetOnNet's third and final retail formation, neither a boom nor crash initiated the re-formation of NetOnNet's actor-network. Instead, it began with more mundane developments: customers' requests and consumers who failed to conform to NetOnNet's prescribed mode of exchange. Of course, that development was not led by or demanded entirely by customers; that would be a simplistic explanation. That initial complication nevertheless intervened and catalysed a re-formation process that ended in a new configuration of warehouses and catalogues.

As such, it was not a particular identity that precipitated a certain configuration and capacity, but the other way around. That is, the new configuration, including warehouse stores and a catalogue, not only enabled new capacities but also required a new identity. The new formation achieved a capacity to enlist consumers and to promote and enable exchange in several ways. Consumers could shop online, shop at one of the company's warehouse stores, or use the catalogue and call or fax in an order. The new configuration of elements was thus efficient in producing customers and transactions, but NetOnNet nevertheless had to again reposition its identity. The solution was to craft a new formation: the retail hybrid, a variation of e-

tailing that also encompassed physical stores, which were presented as the materialisation of their e-business. The new identity was advantageous in that it could both encompass NetOnNet's new configuration while simultaneously differentiating the company from its competitors.

As this last retail formation illustrates, retail re-formation is not only initiated due to economic booms or crashes. On the contrary, other actors and events can play the role of instigators (cf. Alexander et al. 2009; Mallard 2016). In NetOnNet's case, unruly consumers destabilised the network and initiated its re-formation. However, to be clear, consumer requests did not alone drive the change by furnishing the initial complication that put that change into motion. Also involved was the fact that NetOnNet's management came from backgrounds of traditional store-based retail and had both the experience and interest in establishing stores, as well as a drive to increase sales by establishing stores.

## Discussion

This far, we have provided an account of NetOnNet and the emergence of three instances of retail formations. In the first unfolding of NetOnNet's retail formation, we traced how the company evolved from an idea in the founders' old office to a full-fledged *hyped e-tailer*, as the format was commonly understood in Sweden during the dot-com boom. As NetOnNet's network grew, more elements were added and associations made; that process included interlinking elements such as its investors, staff, and e-visitors, as well as its website and documents explaining its visions and plans. In this particular instance of retail formation, NetOnNet approached the e-tailing format as a template, with the objective of imitating and aligning itself with the version of e-tailing prevalent at the time.

In the second unfolding of its retail formation, NetOnNet again rearranged itself. The identity of the network changed from that of *hyped e-tailer*, an e-tailer as defined by dot-com hype, to *traditional (r)e-tailer*, all in an effort to acquire the capacities necessary to survive the dot-com crash. The elements in the network were reconfigured; new plans and press releases were formulated, and resources were reallocated to operations in Sweden as global expansion was put on hold. NetOnNet abandoned the *hyped e-tail* format as a template, as the format became highly criticised and NetOnNet's identification with it became problematic, and proceeded to modify its own e-tail identity.

The third and final unfolding of NetOnNet's retail formation illustrates how noncompliant consumers can initiate re-formation that eventually leads to conceptual reorganisation. NetOnNet went from being a pure e-tailer to a hybrid retailer that combined an on- and offline presence. That development involved a radical reconfiguration of the network as both warehouse stores and a catalogue were added. The new network achieved new capacities to attract consumers and produce revenue, whereas its identity became less distinct. To address that problem, NetOnNet rebranded itself once again: this time, as a *hybrid retailer* with a physical presence driven by an online logic. This concept, NetOnNet now contended, was the future of retail.

All in all, the account shows how this retailer became an increasingly sophisticated intermediary as multiple points of supply-demand mediations were added in each instance of retail formation. The expansion of the actor-network contributed to an increasing fluidity which, simultaneously, enabled NetOnNet to sustain and even strengthen the position of intermediation between supply and demand.

In the following sections we discuss how this account and the notion of retail formation contributes to our understanding of retail format change and the formation of markets more broadly.

### ***Retail formations as a new approach to retail format change***

First and foremost this analysis contributes to our understanding of retailing and retail format change. What our theoretical framework elucidates in the three retail formations is a dynamic interplay between retailer and format—that is, between what Dawson and colleagues have called *formula* and *format* (Dawson 2005; Dawson and Mukoyama 2014)—that drives change but also is affected by the change. Each retail formation traced in this paper encompassed a dynamic relationship between NetOnNet and the e-tail format. In each, NetOnNet enacted that format in a specific way—via reproduction, modification, and reinvention—and by so doing also played a part in shaping how the format was understood and performed at the time. Conversely, the e-tail format was an actor in each instance of retail formation; it had the capacity to change the NetOnNet network and the agency to reorganise its practices in numerous ways. It could give agency to a company or negate it; it could also intermingle in its organisation and become part of the network.

Central to those dynamics are the issues of imitation and differentiation. Each retail formation meant crafting a specific identity—one similar to other actors in some respects but different in others. In the first retail formation, NetOnNet was to be similar to other hyped e-tailers, but different and indeed unique in that it was Sweden's first consumer electronics e-tailer. In the second, NetOnNet was positioned as an e-tailer, albeit a special kind of e-tailer: one similar to traditional retailers in terms of experience and cost awareness, among other things. In the third formation, NetOnNet drew upon elements from both the e-tail and traditional retail formats to enact a unique hybrid retailer identity. In all three retail formations, NetOnNet both imitated and differentiated itself to enact a specific identity that was at once different from and similar to other companies and retail formats.

Consequently, by adopting the notion of retail formations we draw attention to the dynamic process that shapes both individual retailers and retail formats. During this process it becomes clear that retail formats contribute to shape retailers, but retailers are also actively involved in the shaping of retail formats. This process involves both imitation and differentiation between retailers as well as between retail formats. By treating both format and formula symmetrically and by conceptualising both as the temporary result of retail formations, we can account for the dynamic relationship between them, as well as for how such relationships are formed.

By extension, our analysis challenges many of the prevailing assumptions in the literature on retail format change. It shows that instead of taking retail formats as the starting point and assuming that they have clear boundaries and essential characteristics and operate on a certain level—for instance, a retail firm or retail format (Brown 1987a; Dawson 2000; McGoldrick 2002; Reynolds et al. 2007; McArthur, Weaven, and Dant 2016)—it can be fruitful to allow for agential variation between actors in terms of how they are constituted, their reasons for acting, and their capacities, as well as how those factors can differ over time (Andersson, Aspenberg, and Kjellberg 2008; Hagberg and Kjellberg 2010).

Our analysis also demonstrates that it is problematic to assume a priori, as some retail literature does, that there is only one source of change (cf. McArthur, Weaven, and Dant 2016). It furthermore questions notions of change driven by environmental influences or interdependent patterns of co-evolution, since the latter assume relatively clear boundaries between retail formats and their environment in order to co-evolve (cf. McArthur, Weaven, and Dant 2016). On the contrary, our analysis suggests that different actors and elements can initiate retail formations.

Furthermore, our analysis has demonstrated that retail formation is an ongoing process without a clear beginning or end and needs not follow given evolutionary phases. Efforts to stabilize the network by ascribing certain characteristics to specific retail formats, and drawing boundaries and distinguishing between retail formats, were central to the process of retail formation in our study. However, the NetOnNet actor-network that we traced still continues in a state of flux, changing in ways that were difficult to anticipate. This analysis exemplifies that change, not stability, is the norm (cf. Kjellberg, Azimont, and Reid 2014) and also shows that change is difficult to predict.

Finally, the approach developed and analysis conducted in this paper demonstrate that it can be problematic to assume that format changes due to macro-level forces and that formula changes due to micro-level forces (cf. Dawson and Mukoyama 2014). Instead, adopting the notion of retail formations and treating the developments as symmetrical clarifies that both format and formula can be conceived of as the temporary results of retail formations, for which there could be many different sources of change.

### ***Understanding the re-formation of markets***

While focused on retail formations, this analysis can also contribute to broader discussions of market formation and market dynamics. Our analysis of NetOnNet and its retail formations show that the making and re-making of this market actor is the result of continuous and heterogeneous processes that involve multiple actors and do not necessarily follow a priori given logical sequences.

More specifically, this analysis can contribute to our understanding of market formation and market dynamics in two ways. First, this analysis demonstrates the importance of taking a broad approach to the study of market formation, and avoiding what Giesler and Fisher (2017) call the ‘economic actor bias’. Counterintuitive as it may seem, to investigate the making of a market actor or any other market entity one must often take into

account non-economic actors and entities - for example, consumer interest groups (Kjeldgaard et al. 2017), trade organization (Humphreys 2010, Mallard 2016), NGOs (Holt 2012), lawmakers (Humphreys 2010, Mallard 2016), the media (Giesler 2012), scientific experts (Giesler 2012), and political actors (Kjellberg and Olson 2017). While these actors may not be regarded as part of the market, they can play a key role in shaping markets as well as the agency and identity of market actors.

We also show the importance of looking at multiple economic actors when trying to understand market formation. In addition to the economic bias, one could also argue that there is a distinct corporation-consumer bias in studies of market formation (Humphreys 2010). Much attention has been directed towards the actions and interactions of corporations and consumers in trying to understand market formation and dynamics. While there may be very good reasons for focusing on corporations and/or consumers in specific cases or approaches, it is important to keep in mind that these are not the only economic actors that matter. For example, in our case, consumers were admittedly involved in all retail formations but were only change agents in one of them (in the sense that their actions initiated a process of retail re-formation). As others have convincingly demonstrated, consumers can be key actors in market formation (Martin and Schouten 2014, Harrison and Kjellberg 2016); however, they are far from the only actors that matter and are not necessarily at the centre of every market formation. Similarly, although corporations play a central role in most instances of market formation they are not the only, nor necessarily the main, actors involved. In many instances the important groundwork of creating markets is carried out by other actors, such as the media and NGOs (Holt 2012). Our analysis demonstrated that while the NetOnNet Company and its managers were central to all retail formations, other economic actors, such as financial actors, were also imperative as much of the corporation's agency was gained and leveraged through the enlisting of other non-corporate actors.

Furthermore, it is not only human actors who are involved in market formation. Devices are often at the heart of market formation (Muniesa, Millo, and Callon 2007). In our case, various types of devices — including documents such as investment proposals and supplier contracts, as well as marketing devices such as the website, catalogue, and warehouse stores — played crucial roles in retail formation. This supports the argument that to understand how markets and market actors form and re-form, one must often take into account the role of market devices (Munisa, Millo, and Callon 2007, Cochoy 2008, McFall 2015).

With this analysis as groundwork, we therefore argue for the advantages of approaching market formation, market change, and the making of market actors broadly, taking into account the possibility that various types of heterogeneous actors may be actively involved. For example, in our case, the analysis of NetOnNets retail formations would not have been possible without a heterogeneous approach. It could not have been understood purely as an accomplishment of discourse, nor could it have been comprehended in material terms only. To account for the various retail formations, we also had to include and analyse the actions of various actors, and not delimit the scope to only corporations or only consumers.



Consequently, while specific studies may, for valid reasons, focus on consumers or corporations, discourses or devices, and economic or non-economic actors, it is important not to reduce our understanding of market formation to any single actor or dimension. One must keep in mind that, more often than not, one needs to take a heterogeneous multi-actor approach to understanding market formation and dynamics.

Second, this analysis of retail formation also contributes to our understanding of market formations and market dynamics by illustrating the entangled relationship between markets (actors and their formation) and the socio-historic and socio-cultural processes they both draw on and contribute to.

As McFall (2015), notes, every market has a history and it is often imperative to understand that history if we are to understand how markets have formed and why they are shaped the way they are today (see, e.g., Brei and Tadjewski 2015). While historical analyses are not particularly common in marketing and consumption studies in general, sensitivity to historical context has become somewhat of a trademark for market studies. Longitudinal studies of the brand-mediated market creation of Botox (Giesler 2012), a historical analysis of the formation of the market for bottled water (Brei and Tadjewski 2015; Holt 2012), historically informed studies of market devices such as packages and shopping carts (Cochoy 2004; 2008), and an analysis of how retail trade in France has changed in a process over a period of 40 years (Mallard 2016) are a few examples. These and other studies clearly show the need to go beyond the contemporary in order to understand market formation.

Our analysis contributes to the tradition of historically inclined market formation studies. As a study on retail format change, taking a longitude approach is logical. It shows the importance of taking into account the socio-historical background of market formation but also, and in our case more importantly, the need to study history “as it happens” in order to be able to produce rich, detailed empirical material about market formation processes over time. This has, as we have shown above, been crucial for our analysis and the arguments made in this paper. Importantly, we also show that markets and market actors both shape and are shaped by socio-historic process and context. NetOnNet, we saw, emerged as a market actor from and in part as a result of particular socio-historical process (dotcom boom and crash), but this retail actor also played a part in shaping that socio-historical process and defining it – both as it happens and in retrospect. The relationship was one of mutual influence and interdependence.

In addition, this analysis, like other market-making analyses, illustrates how market formations both emerge from and are anchored in specific socio-cultural processes. As others argue, the socio-cultural contexts and processes shape how a market is made and also the formation of the market actors (Komarova and Velthuis 2017). Focusing on the discursive crafting of markets, studies have, for example, shown how a market for bottled water is constructed by drawing on discourses of purity, nature and health to frame a product as meaningful (Brei and Tadjewski 2015), or how competing technology discourses construct market dynamics (Giesler 2012). These analyses show that change is often (at least partly) the result of dynamic

socio-cultural relationships between market actors and is to be expected (Giesler 2012). Market stability — crucial to the existence of markets — is achieved through continuous reproduction of relationships and the (re)configuration of actors (Kjellberg and Helgesson 2007).

In our case, NetOnNet's retail formations both drew on and contributed to the broader socio-cultural processes that dominated the various formations. In the early days of e-tailing, and to some extent in contemporary markets, technophilic and technophobic discourses either revered the new technology or condemned it. (Giesler 2012, Kozinets 2008). As these discourses alternated and clashed, they constructed tension but also drove change. In other words, this was a turbulent period and one that NetOnNet played a key role in shaping. In fact, it was, at least in part, this retail actor network's ability to adapt to reshape current socio-cultural processes that allowed its continued existence and expansion. This retail actor-network was remade, changing both its identity and agency, to navigate these broader processes of economic, social, and cultural restructuring.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have offered a more dynamic account of retail format change by introducing the notion of retail formations. This notion draws attention to the dynamic configuration process that shapes both retail formats and individual retail companies. More specifically, by using a constructivist market studies approach and drawing upon an ethnographic study, we have demonstrated how NetOnNet experienced three retail formations during e-commerce's emergence in Sweden. As our study has illustrated, retail formations are continually remade as various retail actors enact them. An array of elements such as individuals, ideas, and artefacts are involved in the initiation and intensification of formations, and such formations do not necessarily follow a given sequence.

This paper contributes thus to our understanding of an increasingly liquid retail by offering a more dynamic approach to the study and explanation of retail format change that does not take formats as givens, and does not assume a priori what or who causes change, or even that change has to occur in a given sequence.

More broadly, this paper contribute to the emerging body of work on socio-cultural retailing (Fuentes and Hagberg 2013) by developing and exemplifying a way to fruitfully explore and conceptualize how broad and increasingly "liquid" social, cultural, technical processes both shape and are shaped by retailers. The analysis presented here demonstrated the importance of taking a broad constructivist market studies approach to the study and conceptualization of retail, considering multiple actors (economic and non-economic) and their doings, treating retailing as a heterogeneous phenomenon, and taking into account the socio-historic and socio-cultural processes linked to the making and formations of retail entities.

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