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Mobile Payments, Social Money:
Everyday Politics of the Consumer Subject

Ruben Kemers and James Brassett

Abstract

How should we think about mobile payments systems like Apple and Android pay? We argue that mobile payments should be understood in the context of changing consumption practices and the wider problematic of the consumer subject in IPE. One (managerialist) view of these changes suggests that certain 'immaterial' values in brands, logos, or networks can become an important element in economic growth (Pine & Gilmore 1999; Arvidsson 2006). Thus, businesses increasingly craft an integrated user experience to realise brand value as the indicator of future consumption, e.g. Facebook, Netflix. Against this view, the critical literature has underlined how the customer relationship should be understood as an element in corporate power; enticing consumer subjects to dedicate their social lives to the task of monetisation (Zwick et al. 2008; Scholz 2013). Rather than choose between sides of this dichotomy, we suggest it may be more fruitful to reflect upon the unanticipated potentialities of mobile payments in connecting consumer agency with new techniques of public interaction. By reflecting on the sociality of money (Appadurai 1985; Maurer 2012), we move beyond a simple cost-benefit analysis, or a structural determinism, to emphasise the contingency of market subjects and how they interact with emergent practices of mobile payments; questioning how to think about the relationship between consumer subjects, on the one hand, and a putatively impersonal (yet palpable) global economy, on the other.

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Introduction: the emergence of mobile payments

Mobile payments have come a long way in a short period. In 2006, the Guardian reported that Premier League "season ticket holders are trialing a system through which they 'show' their Nokia 3320 handset to an automatic reader to get into a game, instead of handing a card to a gate attendant".[1] Nearly a decade later Apple has launched its mobile payment system 'Apple Pay', which allows consumers to pay for all kinds of goods with their mobile phones - and to do so in one 'natural' motion: the payer holds an iPhone near to the shops' contactless reader, while pressing one finger on the phone's Home button which recognises the biometrics and authorises payment.[2] Apple's new payment technology was soon followed by Google's 'Android Pay', meaning that mobile payments are promoted by two companies that provide the operating systems for well over ninety percent of the world's smartphones.[3]

The adoption of new technologies is clearly an unpredictable, fast-paced process, and the success or failure of mobile payments is hotly debated. But whatever the outcome, this project is not trivial. On one level, it challenges financial intermediaries' exclusive privilege over the payment-related matters of money, which constitute one of the largest sub-sectors in finance. With the banking sector gradually embracing digitalisation, the payment sector is at the centre of a development that allows tech-giants like Google and Apple to enter the market in a way that may shape its future. On another level, it necessarily moves us beyond the question of 'success or failure' of mobile payments to consider the social performance of markets (Brassett, 2016). How do mobile payments change the way we relate to markets? How do they perform new assumptions about money, the economy and consumer subjectivity? In answering these questions we seek to provide a critical analysis of what might be termed the social life of mobile payments (Appadurai 1985).[4]

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[1] http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2006/oct/19/money.consumernews, last access 05/11/2016
[2] https://www.apple.com/apple-pay/, last access 05/11/2016
[3] http://www.idc.com/prodserv/smartphone-os-market-share.jsp, last access 05/11/2016
[4] Importantly, this is not an article about the *essential* nature of money. Instead, we follow a literature on money which treats it as *inessential*. That is to say, we do not buy into the idea of money as a consistent unity. So for instance, we do not subscribe to a view that capitalist money is *necessarily* an instrument of commodification. Nor do we subscribe to an opposing view that alternative or local money initiatives automatically create a renewed sense of ethical community. As Dodd put it: "Empirically, money is enormously complex, and the possibilities for organizing it are immensely varied. But what do these apparently partial forms of money have in common that enables us to call them "money"? It is not possible to arrive at a satisfactory empirical answer to this question. Any answer that focuses on the functions of money, its material qualities or institutional affiliations, is bound to fall short: there are always exceptions and counterexamples" (Dodd 2014: 6). So instead of engaging in a conceptual 'diagnosis of money', we are

Our argument is developed over three sections. Section 1 places mobile payments in historical context by developing a brief genealogy of mobile payments from early use in the field of development (as 'mobile *money*' via micro-finance arrangements) through to the current context of the electronic payment industry. Initially, the opportunity of mobile payments was seen in leveraging existing mobile communications networks, which have far greater reach than banks, to deliver financial services to the world's poor (Maurer *et al.* 2013a). On this understanding, the so-called 'unbanked' could become included in monetary relations via a simple digital fiat. The success of this strategy initiated a new sociality around mobile payments: business communities, philanthropic organisations, and regulatory institutions came together to explore the social and economic potential of mobile payment services (Maurer 2010: 1-4). Once in place, this sociality formed the backdrop for an outburst of utopian experimentation with new visions and projects dedicated to re-thinking the role of mobile phones as financial devices. Out of this phase of experimentation and increasing sophistication a new opportunity for mobile payments emerged. In contrast to *mobile payments for the unbanked*, which runs with low-end phones, *mobile payments for the banked* could take advantage of the rapidly increasing processing power of smart-phones to complement the use of credit and debit cards as a more convenient way to pay.

One effect of this genealogy is to suggest that mobile payments are not simply a new technology added on to existing consumer networks, but actually have their own set of historical and normative roots in development practices. Indeed, Section 2 argues that the creation of mobile payments was contingently posited within a specific managerial discourse that developed and refracted elements of these existing fields. A new notion of 'productive consumption' captured the imagination of marketing and management professionals and allowed for certain synergies between technology and market agency. Central to the idea of productive consumption is the imagination of the customer as a proactive subject with changing tastes, needs and desires. Thus, in order to secure future business, companies have begun to think of their products as mere value propositions that

rather more modest in our objectives, seeking to make sense of one recent drive to change how some people pay for things, which has entered into a phase of experimentation that we find productive and challenging in certain ways (See also Maurer 2012).

cannot do more than invite consumers to create a "consumption experience" (Pine & Gilmore 1999; Zwick *et al.* 2008: 179-184).

Against this background, we argue, the business model of mobile payments does not lie primarily in the reduction of transaction costs - and the resulting, fee-based profits from an expansion of monetary flows, - but in the growth of brand value from the performance of social flows. This alters the relationship between customers and brands; whereby the latter respond by staging the consumption experience in terms of a mutually beneficial relationship. Of course, critical approaches might point to the exploitative character of this relationship; that instead of offering consumers new freedoms, it actually seeks to enlist them as docile market subjects of network growth. However, in Section 3 we seek to forestall such a classical dichotomy by emphasising the need to reflect upon the unanticipated consequences of this new sociality of mobile payments. By developing upon the everyday politics of consumer agency, we reject the notion that mobile payments are just another element in the unrelenting extension of the social-as-commodifiable. Instead, we emphasise the agency of market subjects to appropriate consumption experiences to their own ends. This culminates in a discussion of how consumer subjects might re-imagine the public sphere of mobile payments in creative political terms.

1. Mobile payments: a brief genealogy

> "In the United States, where smartphones account for more than half of mobile subscriptions, one-third of consumers are using their phones to make payments. Unfortunately for banks, many of these payments are transacted through mobile apps controlled by online-payments specialists and digital merchants. Payments represent the beachhead for the entire banking relationship, and this beachhead is under attack"[5]

McKinsey and Company present a dramatic image of the challenge presented by mobile payments. Such drama, however, relies upon a presentism that inhibits sober analysis. In reality, the payments 'beachhead' has been 'under attack' for quite some time; Apple Pay is only the most recent spearhead of a number of projects, including Square Card Case,

[5]http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/financial_services/the_digital_battle_that_banks_must_win, Accessed 05/11/2016

Google Wallet, and CurrentC, which aim at reimagining everyday financial life. What connects these different systems is the idea that *mobile phones* should play a significant role in delivering financial services to the market subjects of the digital era. In hindsight, this role for mobile phones might appear natural - given their ubiquity in daily life, the explosion of social activities they facilitate, and the convenience of contactless payment technology. However, a closer look reveals that such convenience has also been realised by credit cards, which likewise offer contactless payment technology. Why, then, challenge credit cards by developing payment services on a device hitherto used for communication?

In this section, we trace how the idea of mobile (phone) payments emerged in the context of a development concern with poverty alleviation and the (normative) view that an absence of monetary relations, indeed banking more generally, was a significant obstacle (cf. Collins *et al.* 2009). Thus, mobile payments were developed and used to facilitate electronic transactions by people who lacked access to a credit card or bank account (Batchelor 2012). Such transactions could be facilitated by mobile network operators, which began to create virtual currencies that circulated between mobile phones.[6] Because the store of value of these currencies is maintained and potentially s(p)ent anywhere, this service came to form the basis of what we understand as 'mobile money'. The historical emergence of mobile money witnessed an entanglement of business communities with philanthropic organisations and regulatory institutions, to form an 'emergent sociality' (Zhan 2005: 32); a set of ideas, practices and material arrangements that allowed for the identification of mobile phones' socio-economic potential as facilitator of financial services for the poor (Maurer 2012: 592-593). In what follows we briefly describe the emergence of the "mobile money opportunity" (Jenkins 2008: 5) for poverty alleviation that formed the backdrop for an outburst of utopian experimentation aimed at disrupting the payments landscape.

<u>Money for the unbanked: the origins of mobile payments</u>

In 2003 mobile money first appeared as a side note. Gamos Ltd., a small consultancy, had undertaken research on the role of telecoms infrastructure in poverty reduction and reported: "*The extensive use of telephony for facilitating financial transfers has been noted*" (McKemey *et al.* 2003: 55). They observed that people commonly used pre-paid cell phone credit as a

[6] The two most prominent early providers of such currencies were M-PESA in Kenya, which we present later in the article, and GCASH in the Philippines. For an overview see (UNCTAD 2012).

means of value transmission. Users simply sent an SMS with the code of a top-up card to a person, who could then decide to either activate airtime for her own phone, or to sell it to friends or merchants (Batchelor 2012: 85).

Four years later, this procedure was formalised by the largest mobile network operators in Kenya with a service called M-Pesa. Named from the Swahili word of money, M-Pesa enabled Kenyan users to transfer funds via SMS text messaging. Although originally designed for the disbursement and repayment of microfinance loans, the subscriptions for the service grew rapidly, rising up to 2.5 million within the first 12 months (Jenkins 2008: 5). Users took advantage of the M-Pesa service to make all kinds of everyday transactions and today there are more mobile money accounts than bank accounts in Kenya. Users can pay for almost everything from daily groceries to utility bills to medical treatment via SMS (Scharwatt *et al.* 2014: 26). This success laid the groundwork for a new movement under the banner of social justice that sought to promote *mobile money for the poor:*

> "Mobile phones have transformed lives in rich and poor countries alike. Of the world's 7 billion people, there are now 6 billion phone subscriptions globally compared with 2 billion or so bank accounts. Across 40 UN-designated Least Developed Countries (LDCs) surveyed by UNCDF, mobile phone penetration was at 30% while access to a bank account was 14% on average. (…) We know from the example of M-Pesa in Kenya that mobile money has the potential to reach millions of users in the time it has taken traditional microfinance to reach thousands."[7]

Indeed, the level of attention that mobile money attracted with M-Pesa was illustrated by the prominence of delegates at the first 'Mobile Money Summit' held in May 2008, in Cairo. The Summit was hosted by the *Groupe Speciale Mobile* Association (GSMA), the leading trade association of the world's mobile network operators. Supporters included the World Bank's International Finance Corporation (IFC), the UK Department for International Development (DFID), and the Consultative Group to Assist the Poor (CGAP), as well as philanthropic sponsors like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and finance groups like Western Union, and Visa (cf. Jenkins 2008).

Inspired by M-Pesa's unexpected success the participants were asked to envisage a future economy in which mobile phones are the essential tools to send and store money,

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[7] See website of Mobile Money for the Poor (MM4P), a project of the United Nations Capital Development Fund (*UNCDF*) sponsored by the MasterCard Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Sida and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), http://www.uncdf.org/en/mm4p, last access 13/03/2017

and to alleviate the financial "kitchen table struggles" (Chipchase *et al.* 2011: 16) of everyday life. Although such visions had certainly been circulating and promoted for some time, Maurer (2010) argues that the Summit marks a critical point where the mobile, financial, technological and payment sectors joined forces so mobile money could "take root, proliferate and go to scale" (Jenkins 2008: 7). The Summit was presented as a "watershed event" to grow synergies between mobile money opportunities across a range of industries and addressed leaders and experts with a clear message: "it is not enough to think about point solutions. […] Instead, industry players need to think in terms of developing mobile money *ecosystems*" (ibid.).

Taken from an article published in 1993 with the title: *Predators and Prey: A New Ecology of Competition*, the metaphor of a business ecosystem places executives into a "healthy savanna ecosystem" struggling like lions and antelopes to further the cause of species expansion (Moore 1993). The article suggests that leading corporations should actively develop a healthy ecosystem by orchestrating suppliers, regulating institutions, and other partners (ibid: 81). In order to remain competitive, it is argued, companies must cultivate their ecosystem as well as they cultivate their own business. Hence, the relationship with other firms, regulators and with consumers is crucial to ensure the survival of the emerging ecosystem. It is not just that the market for digital experience is a crowded place, but rather that the clutter has a kind of productive sense to it. Producers, competitors and consumers are brought together in a natural(-ised) logic of healthy competition.

Reports from the follow-up Summits suggest that the call for convergence around the idea of mobile money ecosystems was successful (Dolan 2009; Baptista & Heitmann 2010) and gradually created business strategies that focused on the ecology of mobile money, where the competition of different companies must be moderated, so that the industry could grow as a whole: "The required commitment to cooperation and shared benefit increases as services expand and partnerships grow." For MTN Ghana, there are nine partner banks. "It was a challenge to get everyone to understand why they needed to share," says Bruno Akpaka, General Manager, MobileMoney, MTN Ghana, "but now everyone understands their role" - and this has spelled success for the partnership, which expects over 2 million mobile money customers within the first year of deployment" (Baptista & Heitmann 2010: 9).

In this way, mobile money came to be understood as a showcase model for the increasingly popular development paradigm to 'eradicate poverty through profits' in the seminal words of C.K. Prahalad (2010). In terms of profits, mobile network operators saw the opportunity to increase their infrastructure usage, which would raise the demand for network extension and increase the basis for fee-based revenue. M-Pesa had shown the potential to create revenue by charging a high volume of low value transactions with very small fees (Maurer 2010: 2). The reach of mobile networks across customers in all segments exceeded the reach of banks by far and the cash flows of billions of unbanked people promised enormous profits, if they could be shifted to the mobile channel: "Even if mobile remittances can capture only 10 per cent of the US$410 billion in formal and informal remittances to developing countries, it would be a US$41 billion market" (Singh 2009: 516).

Moreover, if a considerable part of economic activity happens through mobile channels, this places the providers of these channels, including mobile phone providers, in a powerful position. Mobile money was vigorously promoted by GSMA.[8] With a stronger focus on poverty alleviation, the World Bank's IFC, UK's DFID and the CGAP promoted the opportunity for sustainable capacity building - "helping poor people forging their own paths out of poverty". M-Pesa had drawn attention to a general lack of financial tools among poor people (cf. Collins *et al.* 2009). With the new technology, development aid associations could introduce such a tool that helped poor people in several ways. They could manage micro-credits, even if they lived far off in the periphery. They could send money to their relatives without fear of delay, loss, or theft. And they could receive credit to invest in future income generation, for instance, by receiving education or starting a small enterprise.

The mobile money ecosystem has grown at a breathtaking pace to form a sophisticated industry. New technologies emerged and also new visions: of increased profit, of technological revolution of social peer-to-peer lending and the disruption of the payment industry. For instance, the food discovery app 'Handpick' offers payment for 'smart groceries' providing "the most affordable local groceries that save time and money while minimising food waste"[9]. Pay&Share combines credit cards with social media accounts

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[8] see GSMA's Mobile Money press releases 2009-2015, http://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/programmes/mobile-money/about/press#top, last access 05/11/2016

[9] http://www.prweb.com/releases/2015/07/prweb12847437.htm, last access 03/09/2015

promising discounts and special offers for those consumers, who advertise what they bought through posts, likes, tweets, +1s, and so on.[10] While the future of this ecosystem is uncertain, its result is clear. It established a role for mobile carriers in the finance sector by providing both a narrative of its profitability and a wider network to develop profitable ideas. Thus, it provided the grounds for a new opportunity to emerge: mobile payments, which inspired the movement of money and credit cards from the leather wallet into the mobile phone.[11]

2. Mobile payments for the banked – but why?

For a long time, it seemed that mobile payments were wedded to the "mobile money for the unbanked"-paradigm. This impression was strengthened by several failed attempts to "disrupt" the payments industry in rich countries (e.g. the first launch of Google Wallet). The obvious obstacle for these initiatives was that most people in rich countries were already using credit cards to do, what mobile money promised to do. Thus, the attraction of cashless payments in developed countries, be it credit cards or mobile phones, does not lie in providing unbanked people with financial means. It lies in the creation of 'new efficiencies', i.e. the construction of a payment system that benefits all actors involved in an act of paying.

Consumers gain in convenience, benefiting from universal access to their money, increased liquidity through credit, as well as more security and shorter queues in the shop. Merchants are promised to attract more customers and to gain from increased sales and higher productivity at the check-out. Banks profit from a fee paid by either consumers or merchants for every transaction running through the electronic networks, and, due to the growth of private credit, interest on debt. Finally, the electronic payment companies get remunerated by the banks for the provision of the physical and social network enabling payments across different banks and merchants.

From a business perspective, the failure of earlier attempts to introduce mobile payments was not surprising: they did not offer significant new efficiencies compared to credit cards, which were just as convenient in terms of speed, security and simplicity.

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[10] http://payandshare.co/, last access 03/09/2015

[11] Indeed, we think it would be easy to argue that without the success of mobile money in the development sector, mobile payments would not be provided by Apple and Google today.

Moreover, until recently financial intermediaries were not inclined to share the "payments beachhead" with mobile network operators or smart-phone providers. Their engagement was seen as an attack. By 2014 the most widely held opinion was that "mobile payment has ignited. (…) But not if you live in the United States or most other developed countries".[12]

What has changed since then, is that both, banks and credit card companies started supporting mobile payments.[13] The new entrants in the payment sector, were not seen as attackers anymore. Rather, there was a widespread sense, very much in the spirit of the Mobile Money Summits, that their arrival promised profitable synergies between smart-phone operators, credit card companies and banks in a new digital payments ecosystem. In the words of Visa CEO Charles Scharf: "The combination of new digital experiences from Apple with new network capabilities from Visa provides for great payment experiences (…) for millions of Visa account holders, merchants and financial institutions".[14] Apple Pay in the UK now also cooperates with Mastercard, American Express and most of the major banks including HSBC, Barclays, and Lloyds. However, it is not straightforward where this cooperation produces profit, as the partnership does not offer significant new efficiencies either.

The increase in convenience is marginal, or as Jimmy Kimmel quipped, it avoids the "excruciating experience to go into your wallet, handing over your card and putting it back into the wallet".[15] Thus, Apple Pay does not produce additional fees through higher turnover to be shared with its partners and in fact, has not generated substantial revenue for Apple[16]. So what makes Apple Pay attractive to the payment sector, and what makes it attractive to Apple?

We would argue that mobile payments are not simply a 'new efficiency' added-on to the existing networks. The mobile payment opportunity is driven by something beyond a market share incentive, i.e. fees based on improved user convenience. Instead, the drive for mobile payments can be understood as part of a wider logic of the digital economy; to craft

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[12] http://www.pymnts.com/news/2014/why-apple-pay-is-fizzling/#.VcEDG_lVhBd, last access 05/11/2016

[13] Apple played a crucial role to secure this support by assuming a "non-threatening" position towards existing payment intermediaries, see http://paymentsviews.com/2014/09/10/apple-pay-shifts-mobile-landscape,

[14] https://www.visaeurope.com/newsroom/global-news/detail?id=1965351, last access 05/11/2016

[15] Indeed, it is commonly argued that this is the major obstacle to mass adoption for mobile payments, Jimmy Kimmel: How to use Apple Pay, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IlBIc_F3j_w, last access 05/11/2016

[16] http://fortune.com/2016/10/17/apple-tim-cook-cash/?iid=sr-link8, last access 05/11/2016

'user experiences' so as to produce an intimate connection between online brands and consumers' everyday life (Thrift 2010; Morozov 2015: 60). On this view, "it's not about 'number of transactions' or 'number of cards' registered, it's about what Apple Pay has changed in the mobile payments ecosystem"[17]. The new role for mobile phones as a financial device, established as a tool for development, was adopted, transferred, and translated into a means to promote new user experiences for people with bank accounts on the high end of the payments sector.

Payments socialised…

> "Today, there are three companies that I think of as central to my life: Google (with search, mail, calendar, maps, and increasingly Docs, Drive, and Hangout); Apple (with Mac, iPhone, FaceTime, iTunes, iTV) and Amazon (with Prime and Kindle). Who's not there? My banks and my mobile carrier. I could switch out any of these much more easily than I could the "big three" (…).Will I continue to use all three (…)? I don't know! I've already been torn – I use Google Maps on my iPhone, rather than Apple Maps, even though Apple Maps is better integrated into various phone activities. But I do know that I will use Apple Pay, and that it will make Apple even more central to my life."[18]

The quote above captures a central drive for mobile payments which resonates with ideas from mobile money for the poor. As with development, mobile phones are promoted as the best chance to offer assistance for the (financial) challenges at the heart of consumers' everyday life – although under different circumstances. Yet, as with development, proponents of the discourse go on to identify mobile payments as part of an emerging business *ecosystem,* which facilitated the diffusion of a financial role for mobile phones. Reporting from the third Mobile Money Summit Baptista and Heitmann call for a broader approach of mobile money:

> "Previous Mobile Money Summit Reports focused on 'developing' and 'accelerating' mobile money ecosystem development. This report focuses on 'deepening and broadening' mobile money ecosystems. Cross-sector partnerships among Mobile

[17] Visa CEO Charles Scharf, see http://www.pymnts.com/news/2015/visa-ceo-talks-apple-pay-union-pay-visa-europe-potential/, last access 05/11/2016
[18] http://paymentsviews.com/2014/09/12/apple-pay-its-your-life/, last access 05/11/2016

Network Operators (MNOs), banks and others are leading to the emergence of deeper, more interconnected networks and new entrants are broadening these networks. Partnerships between MNOs and banks in particular facilitate the development of the mobile money industry as a whole, in a way that these individual industries may not easily accomplish. (…) Cooperatively growing this new mobile money industry marks a critical, powerful *point of convergence between banks and MNOs*" (Baptista & Heitmann 2010: 6: emphasis added).

In what follows, we seek to illustrate, how the ecosystem metaphor and the idea of mobile money have interwoven with new developments, to produce the mobile payments opportunity and a new ecosystem, where smart-phone operators and banks can coexist as 'natural leading species' and jointly realise 'healthy profits' (Moore 1993: 81). While banks still profit from charging fees for the access to money's physical *infrastructure*, we argue that smart-phone operators have developed increasingly sophisticated ways to capitalise on the customer relationship with money's *users*. The possibility for profit from customer relationships is due to the particular cultural and economic context of the digital consumer, who has been characterised by numerous managerial scholars as a new species with changing tastes, needs, and desires (Zwick *et al.* 2008: 169-172; Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2000; Tapscott *et al.* 2000; Vargo & Lusch 2004). To reach the new fickle, impulsive and demanding buyers, managers are told to create 'customer delight' (Seth & Seth 2005) and it has become a central goal of business management to build a capacity for knowing customers in order to anticipate their rapid changes in consumption preferences.

The emergence of the mobile payments opportunity in the developed world is bound up with an increasing demand for effective responses to the capricious consumer. This has supported the importance of consumer surveillance and the trend among leading digital companies to collect, analyse, and sell digital data at an unprecedented scale (Pridmore & Zwick 2011: 272-274). Electronic devices with processing power figure centrally here because they capture consumer choices universally and in detail. Thus, smart-phones deliver the raw data necessary for creating a digital aggregate of complex consumer lives, thereby allowing companies to identify the right targets for marketing intervention (Pridmore & Zwick 2011: 271).

"Interestingly, (…) Amazon.com (among many other Internet businesses) is much more interested in the useful (to them) and potentially saleable information it gets

> from purchasers of books (and many other products) than it is in the sale of the books themselves. Thus, it slashes book prices and sells them at little or no profit in order to obtain such information" (Ritzer 2015: 11).

However, for the managerial discourse, contemporary customers are not only difficult to grasp and satisfy, they also want and should play a productive role in the creation of digital goods and services (cf. Ramaswamy & Kerimcan 2014). In a seemingly product-saturated developed world, managers have long identified information and communication as the central assets to create new values and efficiencies (Thrift 2005: 41). As a result, personal development, dedication, self-responsibility, authentic creativity, soft skills, and so on, became a standard expectation at the work place. With digital media there has been a shift of attention towards the communicative and informational skills of *consumers*, which is inexorably linked with the growing importance of brands in the economy. Indeed, in his influential book Arvidsson (2006) has suggested that today's economic growth increasingly relies on the value of brands, logos, or networks, which are essentially produced by consumers. He argues, that the mere use of branded products produces value as it indicates consumer awareness, which is turned into profit as the probability of future consumption. For example:

> "…in early 2014, Facebook paid $19 billion for a simple messaging company, Whats-App, which at the time was earning little or no money. Facebook itself, with a market value of well over $100 billion, is not earning much money (compared to its market capitalization), yet it is able to raise the capital needed to buy a company that has no earnings. All of that is made possible, of course, by the expectation that Facebook (along with its new acquisition) will be earning huge profits in the future" (Ritzer 2015: 10).

Here, the expectation of future profitability is based on the attention consumers pay to the brand, i.e. consumer awareness is the central source of value. However, such consumer awareness cannot be created by the company alone. It is essentially created by users making branded products part of their everyday lives, i.e. by using, relating, and talking about them and thereby creating socially shared meanings. The business of brands therefore increasingly is rooted in: "a blurring of consumption and production in the sense that the use or enjoyment of the consumer products around which they are organised generally depends on or is enhanced by some form of productive contribution" (Arvidsson 2013:

370). Apple, Google, and Amazon, essentially 'live' through an intimate connection to users' everyday life and, thus, the consumers' active creation of brand awareness. On this view, consumers become firsthand informants about the cultural and social currents underlining brand attention. Business strategists increasingly use terms like 'user experience', 'value proposition', or 'co-creation' in which users are framed as participating actors in a mutually beneficial customer-company relationship. The "big three" show how sustained consumer awareness is created by putting the customer in charge to decide, what is "in". The company becomes a facilitator: offering value propositions that consumers may decline, or actively realise and valorise as their own individual or shared projects (Vargo & Lusch 2004: 7).

In light of an emerging concern with the productive capacities of consumers, we would argued that the drive to mobile payments can be characterised as an attempt to create a new value proposition. A significant part of that drive comes from the promise to create an 'obligatory passage point' (Callon 1986) for flows of attention, which are more valuable for the brands, than the revenue created from the flows of money. Through Apple Pay, the brand immerses itself in everyday life to tap into consumers' immanent talent to live a social life (Thrift 2010: 210-216). Paying with Apple Pay is connected to buying Apple's iPhones, which is connected to the use of Apple's iTunes, which is connected to the creation of iTunes playlists for a user-community. Such connections form a vibrant source of new meanings about future value propositions of Apple:

> "The next level of digital integration could support a digital financial planner to manage monthly income, recurring bills, and savings and investments, bringing the bank truly to the heart of the consumer's portable device (...). Taking advantage of further (...) integration, a portfolio app for liquidity and investments might include preset thresholds for buy/sell alerts, special offers triggered when current account balances reach a certain level, and periodic reports and market alerts benchmarking portfolio holdings against standard and custom indexes"[19]

The smart-phone then is not only a wallet secured by biometrical procedures, but also as an organising platform where the whole package of banking services from account statements to mortgages to private investments are readily waiting to be accessed from

[19] http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/financial_services/the_digital_battle_that_banks_must_win, last access 05/11/2016

anywhere.[20] One important selling point of this new value proposition is increased convenience at the point of sale, but another is the promise of a service permanently adapting and improving individual payment experiences. The proposition is to 'socialise' payments by encouraging an ongoing conversation about payments and new situations in which payment solutions could make life easier.

On this view, digital integration around the ecosystem-metaphor is significant. It explicitly promotes the development of a leading role for big companies, where smaller firms depend on their decisions, and, rather than challenging their leadership, test complementary value propositions, that can be appropriated by the 'leading species' when the time is right. This partly explains the dynamic between giant corporations vying for a position as default provider of integrated digital experiences, and the start-up culture around them offering ever new value propositions tailored to capture the latest developments in consumers' lives.

…social monetised?

Against the managerial discourse that celebrates the turn towards mutually created user experiences, a sophisticated strand of critical literature has pointed to the exploitative and disciplinary tendency this development entails. One compelling critique is derived from the (re-)theorisation of user-experiences as uncommodified labor. The argument can be traced back to the work of Smythe (1977) who argued that watching TV is a form of labor sold to advertisers as a commodity and has recently been updated to explain the boosted (intangible) value of digital brands (Scholz 2013).

The 'digital labour' thesis draws attention to the exploitation of labor, which takes place when productive consumers voluntarily assume the tasks formerly carried out by paid staff. Apple Pay may be seen to allow consumers to contribute, for at least a few moments, as an unpaid cashier at the self-checkout, allowing the retailer to save wages. Likewise, Apple's value proposition to create shared playlists on iTunes entices users temporarily to

[20] Indeed, with the recent launch of technology start-ups like Monzo, Fidor, N26 or Tandem Bank, current reality begins to resemble what McKinsey envisioned in 2014. These start-ups propose to unbundle banking services into leaner and more specialised digital 'solutions', which seek to integrate seamlessly into the individual routines of their users' lifestyles. What emerges is the idea of an online bank similar to an app store, which provides different apps that perform all the services traditionally provided by retail banks. Mobile payment is only one of these services. Other services are performed by current account apps, FX transaction apps, online investment apps, personal loan apps, and so on.

work as unpaid online DJs, so there is no need to hire a professional one. Managerial discourse portrays the rise of such consumer participation in highly positive terms. The new digital consumerism is presented as a new lifestyle, which is less dominated by state or corporations, less monotonous, and more creative, individual, and satisfying. While such claims are certainly not spurious, the digital labour thesis points to a negative impact of the blurring between production and consumption, which it identifies as a new way to exploit worker's labor time in the act of consumption.

On this view, the mobilisation of consumers as active participants in the realisation of businesses' value propositions is a conscious strategy to capitalise on advanced "semi-proletarianisation" (Wallerstein 1983). Fordist corporations, for example, were able to promote working-class consumerism on the basis of female homemaking, welfare state provisions, and informal reciprocity among working class communities (Brassett and Rethel, 2015; Fraser 2014: 59). This left a significant part of necessary work unpaid outside the formal market-relations. Likewise, the neoliberal turn "built an entire accumulation strategy by expelling billions of people from the official economy into informal grey zones, from which capital siphons off value" (Fraser 2014: 59; Sassen 1998; Harvey 2005).

In the current period, then, digital capitalism can arguably 'tap into' productive consumption, harnessing consumer-participation for profit. While some might hesitate to see the act of 'waving a phone' for mobile-payment as semi-proletarianised 'cashier-work', the related value propositions are likely to be exactly this. Using a digital financial planner[21] or a portfolio application for liquidity and investments management[22] already looks a lot like work that is traditionally done by accountants or financial consultants. There is thus a tendency to replace paid staff by unpaid consumers, who are not entirely compensated with lower prices for doing the tasks themselves. In fact, consumers may pay even more as a participation premium, hence allowing companies to realise extra profits from increased prices and lowered wage costs.

On another level, the digital labor thesis entails a critique of business strategies designed to bring companies closer to consumers and tap into the very essence of social life, to turn it into something profitable, a critique famously carved out in the work of operaismo Marxists (Lazzarato 1996; Hardt & Negri 2000; Hardt & Negri 2004; Hardt &

[21] See for instance 'Wally' (http://wally.me/) or $pendee (http://www.spendee.com/)
[22] See 'Nutmeg' (https://www.nutmeg.com/)

Negri 2009). Here, the focus shifts from the exploitation of labor time qua consumption, to novel forms of governing labor qua consumers. Where marketers celebrate the increased capacity of enterprises to act as companions in everyday life, critics see it as a deeply reifying project, an invasion of strategic and opportune interventions into consumers' lives. If we produce brand value through the mere awareness of products, then "the entire fabric of our everyday lives, rather than merely our workplace toil, becomes the raw material for capital accumulation" (Scholz 2013: 4).

On this view, the blurring between production and consumption not only serves to replace paid staff with productive consumers. It also creates a condition in which all aspects of consumers' lives are potentially turned into profit, and in which there is little, if any space left for interaction outside capital. This is a condition of corporate proximity, in which companies tune into people's 'vital conversation',[23] taking part in the latest enthusiasms, inviting people to share hopes, and offering assistance in everyday routines; only to then aggregate individual situations in temporary clusters and engineer a profitable flow of attention towards the next value proposition. The argument links productive consumption to a new form of corporate power: "…we witness the emergence of customer management as a form of governmentality, where corporations work with and through the freedom of the consumer subject all the while hoping to ensure that the subject's experience of freedom follows a prescribed program" (Zwick *et al.* 2008: 184). People's creative energies reliably producing new desires, fashions, and everyday behavior, are chased and absorbed as values in various user experiences. But these user experiences are not freeing consumers from cooperate power. The set-up of value propositions is controlled by firms and created to channel consumer behavior into profitable directions.

Thus, companies actively create and incentivise an entrepreneurial consumer self, which, potentially, hands its entire social capacity for affection, cooperation and communication, i.e. all its social experiences, over to the profit calculating apparatus of the branding and marketing industry. The user experience then appears to be a method to

[23] This expression is taken from Thrift (2010: 211), who describes the current marketing of mass individualisation through consumer communities and individualised customer relationships in more detail. It is worth mentioning that systematic attempts of mass individualisation have existed at least since the 1970s (see also Klein 2001), but we agree with Thrift that a series of linked developments in technology and business practices has allowed businesses to pursue this project in qualitatively different ways.

produce willing (and willed) subjects who accept and pursue value propositions with passion. Through this lens, the new mobile payment ecosystem appears not so much as a free new world of payment experiences, but as a controlled laboratory of social capacities, in which consumers are invited to explore, re-think and play with new and more convenient ways of paying, but only to fuel excitement for and awareness of different brands. What usually goes unnoticed, is how their curiosity and engagement is always already mobilised as a source of value, which is captured, aggregated and reshuffled in all sorts of temporary clusters that can be deployed by corporations to create profit.

Against utopian claims that co-creation may constitute a new freedom (Arvidsson 2013), critics dismiss the digital integration of users' experience as a disciplinary project in which the asymmetric relation between companies and consumers augments. Their insights urge caution against the libertarian optimism that closely follows the development and adaption of mobile payments. Mobile payments first and foremost originate in the convergence of a set of managerial conventions around the productive consumer, which both 'frames and forces' its realisation (Thrift 2005: 32). However, there is a danger in this literature of promoting a 'nothing-but' perspective about mobile payments. The critique of business commentators celebrating the arrival of a more 'social' payment solution, might in turn portray mobile payments as yet another means to corrupt the creative capacities of market subjects. Indeed, we would argue that such dichotomous thinking - in terms of the social/commodifying nature of mobile payments - is limiting, because it misses the plural practices that shape mobile payments from within. What is often lost when critics point to the new governmentality of digital integration, which works "through" the users' experience of freedom, is a sense of the openness and uncertainty that underscores mobile payments. While it is important to de-mystify the pure enthusiasm of the project by identifying the exploitative pressures it entails, it would be a mistake to neglect the contradictory partial, and unfinished character of the project. Thus, rather than asking if mobile payments are empowering or corrupting, we seek to emphasise their experimental character and identify those potentialities that may be worth defending.

3. Mobile payments, social money

An interesting place to start thinking beyond the utopian/commodifying dichotomy is to reflect on the assumptions performed by mobile payment enthusiasts, when they celebrate

the 'social' character of mobile technology. This is because the way in which the idea of 'socialising' payments is deployed stands in stark contrast to its traditional meaning, that is, linked to the (statist) provision of public goods. Instead, payments can be 'socialised' in different ways. For example, Pay&Share claims to "*socialise payments*" by integrating payments with social media platforms so that "social media activities like check-ins, likes, tweets, shares, posts, +1's and beyond pay you off with discounts"[24]. Here, payments are characterised as 'social' due to their intimate connection to users' private lives, tailored to their daily consumption behavior represented online. Ironically, then, the meaning of 'socialising' seems to be turned on its head when it refers to private start-up companies taking control of payments away from the state.

Nigel Dodd suggests that mobile payments appeal to consumer subjects because they seem to liberate them from the "old vested interests that were present (…) whenever we used money", pointing to the parasitic seignorage of "states exploiting their formal right over the creation of bank notes and coins for financial advantage" (Dodd 2014: 378-9)[25]. This is paradoxical appeal because private payment networks *also seek to extract fees* from the control over payments, and they largely do not challenge states' privilege to coin. Indeed, by changing cash for electronic payments, users might well be paying more than before: *"[i]t is merely the corporations, not government that takes the proceeds" (ibid: 379).*

Recent EU-legislation underlines this point as it attempts to deal with the fact that competition among private payment schemes has actually *raised fees*, rather than lowering them.[26] This is because credit card companies competed over the participation of card issuing banks, which have an interest in high fees, instead of competing over consumers or merchants that have to accept fees as set by the credit card companies. It is therefore not surprising that the fees charged for electronic payments have been constantly higher than the European Commission considered "economically efficient".[27] As most mobile payment schemes are working with the established financial services companies, the networks' business model in the payments industry is not going to change. And thus, there is an emergent dilemma in how 'socialising' payments has assumed such a radically new meaning,

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[24] http://payandshare.co/, last access 05/11/2016

[25] The profit of states from issuing money has also been called inflation tax.

[26] REGULATION (EU) 2015/751 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL, 29 April 2015, on interchange fees for card-based payment transaction, paragraph 10 & 11, http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32015R0751&from=EN, last access 05/11/2016

[27] ibid.: paragraph 9

when it was once so closely associated with an ethic of state-provision of public goods. Although the EU seems to be willing to force electronic payment networks to act more in line with public benefit,[28] the regulatory intervention does not defend such principles. It practices, what O'Neill calls infrastructure *procurement* by creating "a portfolio of public, public-private, and private infrastructure offerings; designed for specific purposes; targeted at selected groups; available, if possible, under commercial arrangements; and capable of generating market-based returns for private investors" (O'Neill 2010: 9).

We would argue that the most promising line of thought lies in a re-imagination of the public sphere of markets. While state-run monopolies of the Fordist era may have been discredited in some critical circles – in terms of how capital centralisation both relies upon and perpetuates hierarchies of class, race, and gender - they were nevertheless underlined by an "instinct for infrastructure" (O'Neill 2010: 10). Given the recent re-imagination of the concept of socialising payments around productive consumers, this 'instinct for infrastructure' might well be something we consider resuscitating and building anew, not least in terms of its capacity to connect up with wider values of publicness and inclusion. In what follows, we present two ways in which *socialising* payments might move beyond 'procurement' by addressing *existing practices* that surround mobile payments and how they might be developed towards a new kind of infrastructure sustained by a notion of publicness in payments.

What are 'social' payments? Publicness, privacy and radical transparency

An important idea in this regard is to explore the opportunities that arise with the technological capacity to store vast amounts of payment information:

> "It is now possible to attach a lot of information about individuals to transactions at distance. The trend is thus to restore personal identity to impersonal contracts, not least in the market for credit/debt. Of course, powerful organizations have access to huge processors with which to manipulate an often unknowing public (…) but for many people these developments have introduced new conditions of engagement with the impersonal economy" *(Hart 2007: 16).*

[28] They have introduced caps on the interchange fee on debit card transactions forcing card companies to act more like public utilities

Against governmentality arguments, Hart suggests that the traceability of payments might be subverted to ends other than consumer surveillance. He argues that money may convey a sense of universality once the individual act of buying can be linked intelligibly to the "social whole" of the commodity economy. If one of the core dilemmas of the global economy is that consumers and producers can never know with whom they are connected, mobile money actually provides a ready means to keep track of the complex social networks in which we necessarily enter whenever we exchange money for goods. This infrastructure provides grounds for a new kind of impersonal sociality - a sense that "the numbers on people's financial statements, bills, receipts and transaction records constitute a way of summarizing their relations with society at a given time" (Hart 2007: 16).

In fact, the practicalities of a digital transaction register for collecting these numbers are increasingly explored. Professionals in the financial service sector have taken a close interest in 'blockchain' technologies, which exploit business opportunities created by the operation of the cryptocurrency Bitcoin.[29] On a technological level, the blockchain made it possible to keep large digital transaction registers anonymous and decentralised.[30] It is in essence a list registering all ownership and transactions in Bitcoin. This list is saved on every computer in the network and gets updated regularly creating a 'distributed ledger' which is secured by the combined computing power of all participating users against attackers who try to change the stored information. By creating a distributed ledger, the developers of blockchain challenged the need for a central organ, a central bank or government, to operate payments. Although blockchain creates a *public* register tracing every single transaction, it does not reveal information about the users, whose identity is shielded by a pseudonym. In fact, on a political level, one of the biggest concerns of its developers has been the privacy of payments.[31]

In this regard, the blockchain is rooted in a context, which has reflected the critiques discussed above - of a 'prosumer'[32] life seamlessly integrated into a brand's payment

[29]Seehttps://www.accenture.com/ae-en/insight-perspectives-capital-markets-blockchain, https://www.barclayscorporate.com/insight-and-research/technology-and-digital-innovation/blockchain-understanding-the-potential.html, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-09-01/visa-asks-banks-to-participate-in-blockchain-pilot-for-transfers, last access 05/11/2016

[30] For a technical introduction see (Franco 2015)

[31] See the earliest paper by the alleged inventor of the Blockchain Nakamoto (2008) Bitcoin: A peer-to-peer electronic cash system. http://bitcoin.org/bitcoin.pdf, last access 05/11/2016

[32] The term has been coined by Ritzer (2015) to point to the increasing investment consumers are expected to make in the act of 'productive consumption'

experience (Maurer *et al.* 2013b: 265). What we find striking about the blockchain is how it conjures up the image of an economic network in which private liberty and publicness are strangely entwined. Against privately controlled payment networks, it introduces a decentralised system based on the radical transparency of all transactions *and* the pseudonymous privacy of all transactors. Without overestimating the impact of a technology like blockchain, its roll out to mobile payment apps like the Bitcoin Wallet and Plutus Tap & Pay, shows how users might recover, challenge, and re-invent an 'instinct' for infrastructure, which has increasingly slipped from users' conscience.

Blockchain entails a clear effort to organise payments differently and an attempt to further develop money's ability to connect personal economic experience and abstract market dynamics, without retreating to a system of direct relations (local, convivial, community-based and so on). It draws our attention to a potential for re-appropriating the concept of 'socialising payments', which in the sense of Pay&Share means capitalising on users' social platform activities, and provides creative evidence that payments could be 'socialised' in various other ways, for instance, by moving parts of money through de-centralised data systems. Tracing payment information in the distributed ledger might thus be developed as a new capacity to engage with the mobilisation of an active consumer, shielding her privacy, imposing transparency, and contributing to a process of learning how to manage the paradox social condition in which "we cannot know how we are mutually connected, while it is this ungraspable spatial whole, which morally forbids us to claim our mutual unrelatedness" (Karatani 2003: 222).

The productive consumer, (em)powered by technology?

A recent initiative, has started to apply blockchain technology to make supply chains more transparent at the point of sale. 'Provenance' is an enterprise that launched a project to allow consumers to access and verify information with their smart-phones, where, and under which conditions tuna was caught, processed and sold on. Much of the way Provenance presents itself could be described as a perfect example of the ideology of productive consumption. It advertises that it can help businesses to tell 'the story' of their products, so as to:

> 'showcase the values that make your business and products unique. Take those values beyond your "about page" into an interactive digital ecosystem that builds

trust' and creates 'meaningful relationships with customers who value what you make and do'.[33]

Thus, it is clear, that Provenance's promise is as much about gaining from consumers' work and passions – e.g. 'Are you passionate about the people, places and materials behind your products? Support our mission by being an ambassador in your city, or for the industry sector you care most about'[34] - as it is about creating immediate access to information on the supply chain of products. Nevertheless, we would argued that the firm mobilises productive consumers in a novel form of user-based ethics, adding to a smart-phone's function as a payments device, the role of an *auditing device*.

It is an idea which has also inspired 'Fairphone' an enterprise that aims to build a movement for fairer electronics by presenting every step of the production line (including mining of minerals, selection of manufacturing partners and distribution of profits) on its webpage.[35] Apart from promoting a controlled "ethical" value chain, Fairphone presents smart-phones as storytelling devices with the potential to uncover how products are made. Both firms advertise their technology as empowering, because it allows consumers to monitor the enforcement of social standards. But, there is no need to couple the story-telling device to a regime of social certification. Instead, we might imagine all sorts of new possibilities to organise as they allow both producers and consumers to track the complex landscape of places, workers, and materials involved in the value chain of their products.

While it is not hard to imagine how targeted product stories might be sold to different clusters of 'ethically involved' consumers, we would argue that it is not farfetched either, to recognise the potential of such a technology to push productive consumption into new directions, in which for the consumer, new, perhaps greater, potentials for non-branded economic experiences emerge. Public interactions around private practices of payment might then yield new forms of deliberation within – and about – the infrastructure of the digital economy.

Conclusion

We developed a critical reading of mobile payments in the context of a managerial discourse increasingly concerned with the reinvention of consumption and the consumer subject. In

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[33] See https://www.provenance.org/how_it_works, last access 03/11/2016
[34] See https://www.provenance.org/how_it_works/shoppers, last access 03/11/2016
[35] https://www.fairphone.com/, last access 03/09/2015

this discourse, immaterial values in form of brands, logos, or networks are seen as a centerpiece of economic growth. To gain from immaterial values, businesses create different environments for 'productive consumption' within a new 'ecosystem' for integrated digital experiences. However, such emergent socialities of money are themselves dependent upon the successful road-test of mobile payments in the development sector: to place mobile phones at the heart of users' financial lives. In this context smart-phones became a device to tap into its users' social lives and exploit their immaterial values. Thus, we have argued, digital powerhouses are primarily interested in mobile payments as a way to capitalise on social flows, rather than to shave market share from credit cards. While the 'digital labour thesis' rightly suggests such trends are far from neutral, we would resist portraying mobile payments as a straight commodification of everyday experience. Mobile payments are far too diverse for that. Indeed, what seems remarkable to us, is how mobile payments are surrounded by a proliferation of ideas about their *social* role and the different ways of organising them. Provocatively perhaps, we argued that mobile payments and the mobilisation of productive consumers entail ideas and projects that might be worth defending, not least in terms of re-imagining the public sphere of global markets. Mobile payments don't really change how money is produced, or its effectiveness as a store of value, or unit of account. Indeed, mobile payments are realised in cooperation with credit card networks and their increase in convenience is negligible. However, mobile payments do matter as an emergent social practice of 'earmarking'[36] certain digital monies and 'remaking money in the process'.[37] Smart-phones make the payments ecosystem come alive on a personal level. To the extent that we relate to money through mobile payments, money is charged with certain images and sentiments linking the consumer to a digital experience of the market. But this is an open and uncertain process that implies a politics. Mobile payments can potentially challenge us to re-imagine the public sphere of markets by developing a new instinct for infrastructure, more transparent supply chains, and other capacities contributing to a new form of impersonal solidarity within the digital economy.

[36] (Zelizer 2011)
[37] (Maurer 2012)

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