

From Decline to Revival: Shaping Consumer and Market Practice in the European Night Train Market

Linghui Wang, Chair of Marketing, ESCP Business School, Heubnerweg 8-10, 14059 Berlin, Germany, <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0301-788X>

Corresponding author(s). E-mail(s): lwang@escp.eu

Nicole Bulawa, Department of Marketing, Lancaster University Management School, Bailrigg, Lancaster, LA1 4YX, UK, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8425-6171>

Corresponding author(s). E-mail(s): bulawa.n@lancaster.ac.uk

Frank Jacob, Chair of Marketing, ESCP Business School, Heubnerweg 8-10, 14059 Berlin, Germany, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1491-9707>

E-mail: fjacob@escp.eu

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Erik Hermann and Aino Halinen-Kaila for their valuable feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript. We also appreciate the insightful comments from participants of the 2024 Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Conference “Market Shaping Special Track” and the 2025 “Shaping Markets – The Bright Side of Markets” workshop.

Statements and Declarations

This research received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Review Committee (RERC) at ESCP Business School.

This study was funded by the ESCP Business School Research Funding (ERF).

The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Abstract

This study investigates how a market experience phases of decline and reemergence by examining the European night train sector as an empirical context. Drawing on market practices, consumer practices, and market-shaping literature, we identify the mechanisms that underlie market decline and revitalization. We conduct this qualitative study through field observations, document analysis and 45 interviews with various market actors (night train operators, policymakers, travel agencies, activists, passengers). The findings reveal market-growing, sustaining, and restricting mechanisms that influence both market decline and revival. By examining how declining markets can be revitalized, this research contributes to both theory and practice on market shaping, at the intersection of consumption, organizational and market practices. The paper also offers implications for practitioners on aligning retrovation and collaborative strategies, and adapting to shifting norms, while also highlighting the need for future research across varied market contexts and temporal scales to validate and expand these findings.

Keywords

Market decline, market reemergence, market practices, consumption practices, market shaping

Introduction

Sustainability has emerged as a driving force behind many new developments, both at the market and consumer level, and it often drives conscious consumption (e.g., Yan et al. 2024) and sustainable offers (e.g., Field et al. 2021), it can also catalyze the resurgence of previously diminished markets. Notable examples include the revitalization of the second-hand goods sector (Huang and Wong, 2024) and the reintroduction of European night train services (Bearne 2023). Given that the efficacy and resilience of markets hinge on the alignment and integration of their constituent elements and structures (Bulawa et al. 2024; Storbacka and Nenonen, 2011), the re-emerging markets also comprise a combination of new, ceased, and still-existing components and structures. However, it remains under explored on the configurations, robustness, and operational viability of a reviving market. A comprehensive understanding of these aspects is essential to ensure the longevity and sustainability of such market reemergence.

Extant literature has extensively explored market complexity (e.g. Mele et al. 2014), frameworks for market shaping that identify the flexible components and structure of a market (e.g. Keränen et al. 2023; Storbacka and Nenonen 2021), market restricting and retaining activities (Flaig et al. 2021b), and mechanisms underlying market operations (e.g. Bulawa et al. 2024; Peters et al. 2020). However, the primary focus has been on either well-established or those in nascent stages (Bulawa and Jacob 2024). A few exceptions include the studies examining the decline of a traditional circus market and creation of a new circus market (Baker et al. 2019), and opportunities for market shaping during crises (Nenonen and Storbacka 2020; Pedersen and Ritter 2022). Despite these contributions, there remains a gap of research on markets that have nearly vanished and subsequently re-emerged. Understanding the composition of such markets and the mechanisms at play during their decline and resurgence is crucial for harmonizing these phases. This study thus aims to address the following research questions: (1) How do sustainable markets progress through phases of decline and re-emergence? (2) What are the underlying mechanisms that facilitate or hinder the decline and re-emergence of a sustainable market?

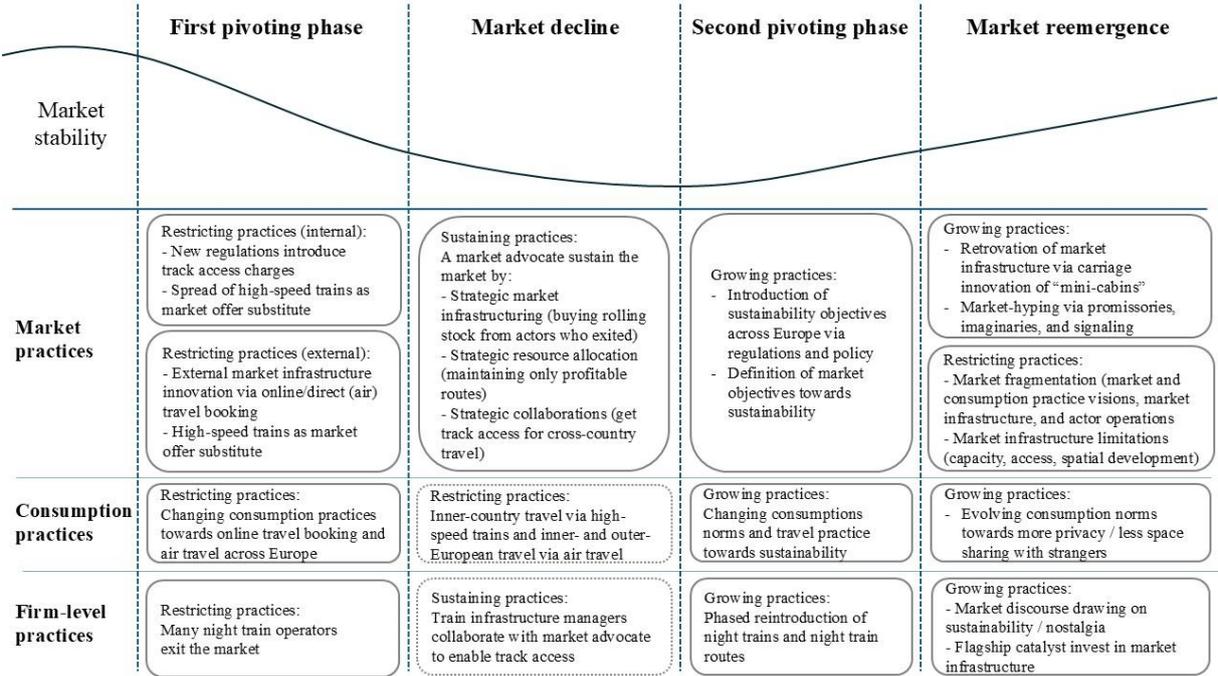
Method

This research select a research context of European night train market, which is currently undergoing a notable resurgence following nearly two decades of limited activity (Martin 2023).

This market provides a rich temporal span of over 25 years, and a robust foundation for examining the dynamic interrelations between consumer practices, market activities, and material infrastructures, thereby enabling a nuanced examination of the mechanisms underpinning market decline and revival. Data collection was guided by a triangulated qualitative methodology, combining semi-structured interviews, short-term field observations, and document analysis to ensure methodological rigor and enhance credibility (Denzin 2017; Fusch et al. 2018; Patton 2015). The semi-structured interviews have been conducted with both market professionals and passengers: 24 in-depth interviews were conducted with a diverse group of industry professionals, including European night train operators, market experts, infrastructure managers, travel agency executives, platform policy practitioners, and lobbying organizations, alongside 21 interviews with frequent night train passengers, continuing until theoretical saturation was reached. Initial fieldwork involved the first author undertaking two night train journeys, recording field notes and photographs to contextualize the research environment (Shenton 2004). Document analysis served to supplement findings, addressing potential knowledge gaps and reinforcing data (Bowen 2009). All data were systematically analyzed using Mayring’s (2014) qualitative content analysis, chosen for its capacity to balance pre-structured coding criteria with openness to emergent themes, aligning with the study’s exploratory aims.

Findings

Figure. 1 Overview of findings



We outline the composition of the night train market chronologically, from the first market pivoting phase, which led to the market's decline, to its second pivoting phase, up to the market's reemergence. In addition, we identify prevailing practices on consumer and market levels and support these insights with evidence from interview excerpts, observational field notes, and secondary sources. The key findings are summarized in Figure 1.

Discussion

With this study, we identify the mechanisms at play from a market's inflection point initiating its decline up to its reemergence. Specifically, we show how consumer and market practice compositions form these mechanisms that contribute to a market's restriction, sustaining, or growth. The discussion chronologically shows (1) the mechanisms that led to the inflection points in the market, (2) how the market was sustained during a phase of decline, and (3) which restricting and growing mechanisms are shaping the market's reemergence.

The first inflection point is influenced by internal and external market restricting mechanisms, remarked as **M_{1a}**, which highlights disruptions to the internal market infrastructure caused by market regulations and an internal substitution of the market object led market actors to exit the market, serving as an internal pivoting phase mechanism from market stability to market decline; **M_{1b}** disruptions to the external market infrastructure caused by market innovation in conjunction with external substitutions of the market object prompt shifts in consumer travel practices, serving as an external pivoting phase mechanism from market stability to market decline. During the decline phase, our findings reveal the role of a market sustaining mechanism, noted as **M₂**: Counteracting practices lead to the establishment of a market advocate, whose strategic resource allocation, market infrastructuring and collaborative partnerships sustain the market offer, functioning as a market-sustaining mechanism during a market's decline.

The second inflection point signals the onset of market revival and is primarily driven by the first market growing mechanism, **M₃**: The alignment between changing consumption and market norms toward sustainability and the market's normative objective serves as a pivoting phase mechanism from market decline to reemergence. During market reemergence stage, on the growing side, **M_{4a}** reveals market actors retrovate the market offer by strategically connecting and adapting long-standing market infrastructures with modern ones to innovate the market offering towards evolving consumption norms while maintaining its nostalgic charm,

serving as a market-growing mechanism during a market's reemergence. Similarly, **M_{4b}** emphasizes market-hyping via normative promissories, consumption imaginaries, and signaling via infrastructure investments, act as a market-growing mechanism during a market's reemergence. However, the re-emerging market also encounters market restricting mechanisms. For instance, **M_{5a}** identifies market infrastructure constraints, such as capacity, access, and spatial development, act as a market-restricting mechanism during a market's re-emergence. Furthermore, **M_{5b}** highlights market fragmentation due to diverging market and consumption practices, limited interoperability of legacy and present-day market infrastructures, disparate market actor operations and market visions act as market-restricting mechanisms during a market's reemergence.

Conclusion

We contribute novel knowledge to the literature on market practices, consumer practices, and market shaping by identifying three mechanisms (market-growing, market-restricting, and market-sustaining) underlying market decline and reemergence phases. In contrast to prior studies examining how markets emerge (Baker et al. 2020; Geiger et al. 2012; Hietanen and Rokka 2015) or collapse (Baker et al. 2018), our findings demonstrate the mechanisms through which markets can recover after a period of decline. We explain how they operate dynamically across market decline and reemergence phases and inflection points. In addition, we extend the research on consumer–market relationship (Bulawa and Jacob 2024; Harrison and Kjellberg 2016) by empirically examining mechanisms of both consumer practices and market practices.

This study highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing the mechanisms that constrain market development during periods of decline. Consistent with the work of Baker et al. (2019), our findings emphasize the imperative for firms and policymakers to maintain agility and responsiveness in the face of early market deterioration. Strategic actions, such as revising restrictive standards, reconfiguring offerings, and tracking early indicators of market weakening, are essential for mitigating decline. Furthermore, our results suggest that markets could be saved during downturns by preserving key market infrastructures and organizational competencies, market actors can not only withstand contraction but also lay the groundwork for future revival. These sustained infrastructural assets serve a dual role, as protective buffers in times of retrenchment and as foundational elements for market resurgence.

While this study provides insights into the mechanisms of market decline and reemergence and draws empirical insights from the European night train market, its findings are inherently contextualized within a single geographic setting, which may limit the generalizability of the identified mechanisms. To further advance the gathered insights, we propose directions for future research. First, comparative studies across multiple reemerging markets, particularly in markets geared toward sustainability transformations, would help establish whether the identified mechanisms (market growing, restricting, and sustaining) operate consistently across different sustainability contexts or require adaptations. Of course, an examination across various market settings differing in nature, such as digital markets, traditional markets, innovative markets would also be a fruitful future research avenue to gather more diversified insights.

Second, longitudinal research designs could examine the temporal nuances of market decline and reemergence processes, further expanding insights into how pivoting phases come about and how the interplay between market, consumption and firm-level practices unfolds over extended periods. Since this study emphasized commonly acknowledged market-mechanisms relevant to this research context, further work may be interested in examining other mechanisms or a combination of a wider set of market mechanisms to get an ever more nuanced understanding on the reemergence of sustainable markets. Finally, it is worthwhile conducting further studies in the field of market reshaping that go beyond examining classic market stages such as emergence and establishment in order to gain a better understanding of different market setups and advance our understanding of what they require to be shaped.

References

- Ansari, S. (Shaz), & Phillips, N. (2011). Text Me! New Consumer Practices and Change in Organizational Fields. *Organization Science*, 22(6), 1579–1599.
<https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1100.0595>
- Baker, J. J., Storbacka, K., & Brodie, R. J. (2019). Markets changing, changing markets: Institutional work as market shaping. *Marketing Theory*, 19(3), 301–328.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593118809799>
- Bearne, S. (2023). Why sleeper trains are being revived across Europe. *BBC News*.
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-64950747>. Accessed 6 April 2025
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Bulawa, N., & Jacob, F. (2024). The unfolding of conceivable practice trajectories as market-making opportunities. *Marketing Theory*, 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14705931241291022>
- Bulawa, N., Mason, K., & Jacob, F. (2024). Should the wheel be reinvented? Market-referencing in the electric vehicle market charging infrastructure. *Journal of Business Research*, 185, 114826–114826. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2024.114826>
- Denzin, N. K. (2017). *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315134543>
- Flaig, A., Kindström, D., & Ottosson, M. (2021b). Market-shaping phases—a qualitative meta-analysis and conceptual framework. *AMS Review*, 11(3-4), 354–374.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13162-021-00213-z>
- Fusch, P., Fusch, G., & Ness, L. (2018). Denzin’s Paradigm Shift: Revisiting Triangulation in Qualitative Research. *Journal of Social Change*, 10(1), 19–32.
<https://doi.org/10.5590/JOSC.2018.10.1.02>
- Huang, F., & Wong, V. C. (2024). From Second-Hand to Third-Hand: Reuse and Resale Cycle. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 51(1), 104–113. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucad042>
- Keränen, O., Lehtimäki, T., Komulainen, H., & Ulkuniemi, P. (2023). Changing the market for a sustainable innovation. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 108, 108–121.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2022.11.005>
- Martin, A. (2023). The new age of the night train. *Financial Times*.
<https://www.ft.com/content/48f4b7d9-1e49-4c78-b8a2-ed8c8fedafd3>. Accessed 31 March 2025

- Mayring, P. (2014). *Qualitative Content analysis: Theoretical foundation, Basic Procedures and Software Solution*. SSOAR. Klagenfurt: Beltz.
- Mele, C., Pels, J., & Storbacka, K. (2014). A holistic market conceptualization. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 43(1), 100–114. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-014-0383-8>
- Nenonen, S., & Storbacka, K. (2020). Don't adapt, shape! Use the crisis to shape your minimum viable system – And the wider market. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 88, 265–271. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2020.05.022>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Pedersen, C. L., & Ritter, T. (2022). The market-shaping potential of a crisis. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 103, 146–153. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2022.03.008>
- Peters, L. D., Nenonen, S., Polese, F., Frow, P., & Payne, A. (2020). Viability mechanisms in market systems: prerequisites for market shaping. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 35(9), 1403–1412. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jbim-04-2019-0139>
- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22(2), 63–75. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3233/EFI-2004-22201>
- Storbacka, K., & Nenonen, S. (2011). Markets as configurations. *European Journal of Marketing*, 45(1/2), 241–258. <https://doi.org/10.1108/03090561111095685>
- Storbacka, K., & Nenonen, S. (2021). Managerial levers of market-shaping strategies: An abductive inquiry. *Journal of Global Scholars of Marketing Science*, 31(3), 337–353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21639159.2020.1808836>
- Yan, L., Keh, H. T., & Murray, K. B. (2023). Feeling the values: How pride and awe differentially enhance consumers' sustainable behavioral intentions. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 52, 75–96. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-023-00928-4>