



Sailing through marketing: A critical assessment of spatiality in marketing literature



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ABSTRACT

Marketing has historically been entangled with the study of geography, which has become a very popular focus in the marketing literature nowadays. However, spatially-oriented perspectives in marketing tend to rest on a conceptual divide between place-oriented and space-oriented thinking, thus inhibiting the production of more eclectic and creative spatial knowledge. This conceptual paper endeavors to overcome this dichotomy by rethinking spatiality in terms of boundedness, openness, functionality and expressivity. These constitute the four cardinal points of a “compass rose” that marketers can use to reassess and combine different appreciations of spatiality. The paper suggests the idea of “sailing” as an appropriate metaphor to explore pioneering multi-dimensional appreciations of geography in marketing and go beyond the divide between place-oriented and space-oriented thinking.

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades or so, we have witnessed a profound transformation in how spatiality is viewed (Warf, 2009) and an extension of the geographical idiom to almost all social sciences (e.g. Anselin, 1999). Geographers have stressed the centrality of the spatial context for understanding any economic and sociocultural phenomena, maintaining that there could not be any proper understanding of how humans create and perceive the world without a rigorous analysis of geographical dimensions. Notably, place and space have emerged as two prominent sets of conceptual tools through which geographers have accounted for the spatiality of economic and sociocultural phenomena. The notion of *place* tends to emphasize ideas of “ground” and “soil”, by establishing a tight connection between the reproduction of economic or sociocultural phenomena and their situatedness within specific locations. In this view, the emergence of an individual or collective identity has boundaries and corresponds with a certain place to the exclusion of other places. This is consistent with a historical association of place with land, which has often fortified nationalistic accounts of nations and regions. Alternatively, the notion of *space* proposes more dynamic and fluid geographical accounts, often connected with the idea of “sea” (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). In this view, space is associated with the idea of being in motion and becoming, consistent with a more relational school of thought. Here, the importance of relationships and connections between and among locations are emphasized

(e.g. Doel, 1999; Whatmore, 2006), often paving the way for appreciations of globalization that overlook, rather than celebrate, the specificities of place.

Recent contributions in human geography have sought to re-examine (e.g. Jones, 2009) and problematize (e.g. Nieuwenhuis, 2016) the distinction between “place-oriented” and “space-oriented thinking” (ibidem), suggesting that resting on only one of these perspectives might not be the most appropriate idea in order to capture the evolution of contemporary societies. This move has resulted in the attempt to reevaluate the underlying assumptions behind each perspective and their methodological implications, in search of potential complementarities and ways to attenuate this dichotomy. Ultimately, this theoretical challenge has contributed to bring new conceptual vitality into the discipline.

The present paper intends to critically assess the growing spatial awareness that is emerging within the marketing literature, by scrutinizing the conceptual contributions on place and space offered by marketing scholars. On the one hand, in fact, the significance of space and place has not escaped the attention of marketing researchers, who increasingly have come to realize that a considerable amount of companies and consumers' activities have to do with space, not only with time (e.g. Hirschman, Ruvio, & Belk, 2012; Hackley, 2013; Chatzidakis, McEachern, & Warnaby, 2014; Demangeot, Broderick, & Craig, 2015). Nobody could deny that geography and marketing have shared an intimate relationship since the 1950s and 1960s, when the approach of

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“marketing geography” acquired international recognition. “Can store location research be a science?” asked Applebaum (1965), one of the founding fathers of marketing geography, in an effort to institutionalize an emerging area of study that aimed to investigate the spatial unfolding of markets and their functioning. In particular, Appelbaum positioned marketing geography as an empiricist and practice-oriented approach aiming to tackle those business problems that are inherently geographical: “The growing role of geographers in business signifies that our profession has something worth while to offer to business. This ‘something’ is professional help to solve problems” (Applebaum, 1961, p. 48). Recent conceptual meta-studies in the marketing literature show a thorough engagement in spatial theory. In fact, these meta-studies (e.g. Chatzidakis et al., 2014; Castilhos, Dolbec, & Veresiu, 2014) devote attention to the philosophical underpinnings of geography as applied to marketing. In other words, marketing has become an established field where spatial knowledge, not only practice, is being produced and discussed.

On the other hand, however, the understanding of spatiality in marketing seems to be still characterized by the divide between place- and space-oriented thinking that human geography is currently trying to challenge. As the following section will explain in detail, this divide is evident in the use of radically opposite terminologies and conceptual tools connected to the heritage of either place- or space- oriented thinking, which might have, even unwarily, directed the creativity of marketing scholars toward the exploration of specific avenues for spatial inquiry rather than others. Thus, the present paper contributes to the literature that explores the relevance of geographical dimensions in marketing by proposing a more nuanced and holistic way to conceptualize spatiality that reconciles the traditional ‘place vs space’ divide. It is hoped that a more critical examination of the spatial dimensions articulated in the marketing literature may also constitute a way to respond to Easton's (2002) call in this journal to develop mature reflections on the philosophical underpinnings of marketing research and, ultimately, to encourage conceptual advances within the marketing literature (see MacInnis, 2011).

The paper is structured as follows. The next section tracks the historical emergence of spatial sensibility in marketing literature and illustrates the conceptual divergence between place- and space-oriented thinking. The following section presents the research approach, by linking together three elements: the value of conceptualization in marketing, the relevance of critical reviewing and the importance of metaphors. Afterwards, the three following sections offer an illustration of the metaphor of *sailing*, which the study suggests as an appropriate conceptual tool to understand spatiality in marketing that includes four *winds*, a *compass rose* and some novel emerging conceptual *courses*. Lastly, a number of concluding remarks are presented in the conclusion.

2. The development of marketing geography and the ‘place vs space’ divide

Accounts that emphasize the interconnection between marketing and the study of spatiality date back to the early 1950s. In the American context, the label of “marketing geography” was proposed by geographers (Applebaum, 1961; James & Jones, 1954) to describe “that aspect of geography which is concerned with tertiary economic activities and particularly the distributive trades” (Davies, 2012, p. 1). Marketing geography has been understood from either a global perspective, as in the study of overseas demands in relation to the locations of main supply centers, or from a more local perspective, as in the study of retail service activities and retail distribution in specific locations (ibid, p. 2). The creation of “customer spotting techniques” based on the identification of different trade areas, more or less “space-distant” from the store location, is an example of how the traditional marketing geography helped enhance the practice of marketing (Applebaum, 1966). It is still possible to observe the legacy of the entwined development of marketing and geography in the subsequent emergence of

spatial sensibility in marketing, both in popular and scholarly accounts. It is not surprising to note that the largest amount of scholarly spatial accounts have been generated within retail studies, as a main domain of application for particular geographical constructs, such as “shelf space” (e.g. Valenzuela, Raghubir, & Mitakakis, 2013), “themed space” (Firat, Pettigrew, & Belk, 2011) or more articulated managerial spatial tools, such as geo-marketing (e.g. Gijsbrechts, Campo, & Goossens, 2003). Additionally, the long-established “marketing mix” (e.g. Goi, 2009) and its evolutions have understood space mainly in terms of the configuration of distribution channels.

Besides the coverage warranted in retail studies, other marketing research streams have subsequently integrated geographic dimensions in the study of marketing phenomena, such as consumer research (Sherry, 2000), service marketing (Aubert-Gamet & Cova, 1999), branding (Charters & Spielmann, 2014; Kavaratzis, 2005) and international marketing (Thams, Alvarado-Vargas, & Newbury, 2016). The influence of spatially-sensitive toolboxes is evident in concepts such as “marketing landscape” and “*mise-en-scène*”, through which Hackley (2013) illustrates how mobile consumers use space. Similarly, geographic units of analysis have occasionally become the testing ground for the application, or fine-tuning, of emerging theoretical approaches, such as Service Dominant Logic (see Warnaby, 2009).

The inconsistent application of geographical tools, concepts and labels is certainly an important issue originated by the existence of various empirical domains of marketing, each of them accentuating specific angles on spatial dimensions. However, this is only a marginal issue if compared to the symptoms of the “place vs space” divergence that also characterizes marketing as a field where spatial knowledge is reproduced. In fact, under a surface of multiple and fragmented geographical accounts in marketing, there appears to be a more profound divergence between the two alternative geographical schools. For example, Chatzidakis et al. (2014) emphasize the relevance of *place*, as a portion of space which is loaded with meaning through the agency of consumers. Accordingly, engaging with *where* consumption experiences are happening implies a consideration of the encounters between marketers and consumers during their daily consumption activities. Marketing scholars who support this place-oriented thinking, especially in consumer research, draw from an anthropological and humanistic geography tradition (e.g. Tuan, 1977) that underlines the phenomenological qualities of spatiality. The notion of *place*, for example, captures spatial dimensions in forms of situated consumption and socially-rooted value exchange between consumers, marketers and organizational buyers, in line with the understanding of spatial identity promoted by Continental Europe philosophy over the last two centuries. In other words, the fact that marketing phenomena happens *somewhere* is based on a geographical tradition that situates identity (in our case, the identity of consumers or brands) within spatial borders, but this is from a perspective that emphasizes places as something static and permanent. This idea is illustrated, for example, by the tendency to appreciate the situatedness of a certain destination's “sense of place” (Campelo, 2015), or to understand markets and consumers in terms of distinct Nielsen market areas, each delimited by clear administrative boundaries. The work of Tuan has been hugely influential not only for scholars at the border between retail and consumer research (e.g. Clarke & Schmidt, 1995), but also for consumer behavior researchers aiming to investigate the implication of a “sense of place” on the processes of value attribution (see Papadopoulos, el Banna, Murphy, & Rojas-Méndez, 2011).

A radically different attempt to describe the importance of geographical dimensions in marketing emphasizes the relevance of *space* (e.g. Watson, Pitt, Berthon, & Zinkhan, 2002; Veresiu et al. 2014). Veresiu et al. (2014), for example, suggest a “socio-spatial approach” to market creation, arguing that space exerts different forms of direct influence over market actors and consumers. In particular, they argue that space possesses an agentic role per se, challenging the tendency in marketing research to “[assign] agency mostly to producers and

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