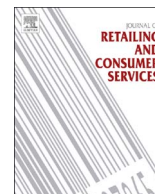




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## Smartphones and the reconfiguration of retailscapes: Stores, shopping, and digitalization

Christian Fuentes<sup>a,b,c,\*</sup>, Kristina Bäckström<sup>a,b</sup>, Anette Svingstedt<sup>a,b</sup><sup>a</sup> Department of Service Management and Service Studies, Lund University, Sweden<sup>b</sup> Center for Retail Research, Lund University, Sweden<sup>c</sup> Centre for Consumer Science, University of Gothenburg, Box 606, 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine and conceptualize how the integration of smartphones is reconfiguring the retailscapes of stores and the implications that this has for retailers and consumers. Departing from an understanding of retailscapes as socio-material assemblages and drawing on an ethnographic study of mobile shopping, this paper shows how the integration of smartphones into the activities of in-store shopping is reconfiguring how store space is enacted. The integration of this digital device reorganizes the activities of shopping, and new informationscapes, socialscapes, and experiencescapes unfold as a result. In the process, stores are reconfigured, agencies change, and the relationship between consumers and retailers is remade.

## 1. Introduction

This paper explores the digitalization of retail by examining how the integration of smartphones in in-store shopping reconfigures the retailscapes of stores.

Mobile phones, and in particular smartphones, are changing the way we shop and the way we relate to the retail landscape (Hagberg et al., 2016). While earlier studies have often shown that mobile phones were only marginally involved in shopping, new surveys and studies suggest that they are now being integrated into everyday shopping practice (Holmes et al., 2013; Spaid and Flint, 2014). In the Swedish marketplace, more and more consumers are gaining access to smartphones – increasing from 36% in 2011 to 77% in 2015 (Findahl and Davidsson, 2015) – and are also increasingly using them in shopping contexts (71% of Swedish consumers have used a mobile phone in shopping contexts) (HUI, 2015). In line with this, the use of smartphones is also increasing globally. For example, today, around 64% of consumers in the USA own a smartphone, compared to 35% in 2011 (Pew Research Center, 2015). The introduction of mobile devices to the practice of shopping is part of the ongoing digitalization of retailing, with potentially far-reaching consequences (Hagberg et al., 2016). Equipped with smartphones, consumers can read up on products and stores, make shopping lists, read shopping blogs, check for product availability, compare prices, and much more, either on the go or while in-store. The question is then: in which ways, if any, are these digital devices changing the way we shop? If mobile phones are transforming

shopping, we need to know how this is being accomplished and with what consequences.

This question has received relatively limited attention in previous research. Research on mobile shopping remains scarce (Groß, 2015a, 2015b), with the majority of it being more preoccupied with intentions and attitudes than with actions/practices (Fuentes and Svingstedt, 2017). Studies have, for example, explored the issue of mobile technology acceptance (Agrebi and Jallais, 2015; Groß, 2015a; Yang, 2012), examining what motivations drive consumers into engaging in mobile shopping (Li et al., 2012; Yang and Kim, 2012) and how consumers react to mobile marketing (Goh et al., 2015; Pescher et al., 2014; Sultan et al., 2009). Hence, while there is some interest in mobile shopping, the majority of the studies conducted to date do not examine how mobile shopping is carried out, what it involves, or how it is different from “regular” shopping.

There are, however, a few studies that examine the “activities” or “behaviour” involved in mobile shopping. These studies show that there is much to gain by taking a more activity-based approach to mobile shopping (Holmes et al., 2013; Spaid and Flint, 2014). These studies indicate that mobile phones are becoming central to the performance of everyday shopping practices (Fuentes and Svingstedt, 2017; Spaid and Flint, 2014). Mobile phones in general and smartphones in particular are advanced technological devices that enable multiple uses, and previous studies have shown that they can work both as “shopping managers” and “social” devices used to turn individual shopping acts into social ones (Spaid and Flint, 2014).

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Service Management and Service Studies, Lund University, Campus Helsingborg, Box 882, 251 08 Helsingborg, Sweden.  
 E-mail address: [christian.fuentes@ism.lu.se](mailto:christian.fuentes@ism.lu.se) (C. Fuentes).

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In this paper, we set out to contribute to this emerging sub-field of activity focused mobile shopping studies by exploring how smartphones are changing in-store shopping. More specifically, our aim is to examine and conceptualize how the integration of smartphones into in-store shopping activities is reconfiguring the retailscapes of stores and how this reconfiguration, in turn, is impacting retailers and consumers. We are interested in how smartphones change in-store shopping activities and the way consumers interact with shop staff and the physical in-store environment. This inquiry is guided by an ambition to understand, but also to critically discuss, how the introduction of this new digital device is changing the way shopping is performed and the implications that this may have for retailers and consumers and their interactions.

Our point of departure is that, to understand how smartphones are reconfiguring in-store shopping, we must also understand how retail space is being re-made through the introduction of this digital device. To this end, we have developed a framework wherein retail space – or retailscape as we refer to it – is seen as a socio-material assemblage (Murdoch, 1998) which is, at least partly, performed in and through shopping activities but also one which, conversely, shapes the way shopping activities are performed.

Empirically, this paper draws on an ethnographic study of mobile shopping which combines interviews with shoppers and observations of stores, shopping streets, and malls. More specifically, we study how consumers use their smartphones while shopping in-store (beauty, books, fashion, interior design, DIY and home electronics available in both in and out-of-town shopping malls and high streets).

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. We begin by explaining, in the first two sections, our approach to retailscapes and by describing the ethnographic study we have conducted. This is followed by the results and analysis section, in which we discuss how the use of smartphones enable a new set of shopping activities and how these, in turn, reconfigure the retailscapes of stores in different ways. This analysis, we argue in the final section, contributes both to our understanding of mobile shopping and the digitalization of physical stores.

## 2. Retailscapes: activities, assemblages, and reconfigurations

The retail environment has long been recognized as impacting customer behaviour and experience (Belk, 1975; Kotler, 1973). The dominant perspective has been that of the “servicescape”, a concept coined by Bitner (1992) in “an effort to bridge the gap between environmental psychology and marketing” and to produce insights into how consumers interact with their physical environment (Rosenbaum, 2005: 257). In the servicescape model, Bitner (1992) outlines the environmental dimensions (scent, music, temperature, spatial layout, sign, symbols, and social interactions) that constitute the servicescape, showing how these stimuli affect consumer behaviour. The model thus relies upon the assumption that the servicescape influences customers’ perceptions, in turn leading to certain customer responses. Over the years, many researchers have taken this model as their point of departure, conducting investigations of the effects that retail dimensions have on customers’ in-store behaviour (see, e.g., Babin and Attaway, 2000; Baker et al., 2002; Brüggem, 2011; Hoffman and Turley, 2002; Hynes and Manson, 2016). In this literature, the servicescape is commonly considered a controlled space; the servicescape coerces people into behaving in accordance with its script (Barker, 1975). Retail planners/designers are the ones who shape the space, and the customer is expected to act according to this previously planned space. Customers are seen as reactive actors; they can neither control nor shape the servicescape. They can only react to its design.

In contrast to the traditional conceptualization of servicescapes, consumer culture theorists interested in “servicescapes”, “marketplaces”, or “retail spaces” have challenged the dominant psychological perspective of servicescapes (Kozinets et al., 2002; Sherry, 1998a). While these scholars also characterize the in-store environment as a place that is organized to evoke certain kinds of experiences and

behaviours and is thus a place controlling the movement of people (Goss, 1993; Sandikci and Holt, 1998: 309; Sherry, 1998b), they also frequently acknowledge the consumer as an active participant in the activities taking place within the servicescape (see also, Kozinets et al., 2004). As Sandikci and Holt (1998) argue, the consumer is “simultaneously the audience and performer of the show” (p. 310). Hence, from this point of view, retail space is seen as being constructed through the interaction between, on the one hand, the organized environment and, on the other, the consumer using this place. Stores and other retail sites are not merely places of consumer manipulation but serve as cultural arenas and sites in which cultural resources are both produced and circulated (Arnould, 2005).

In this paper, we draw on and contribute to this latter constructionist tack by developing a conceptualization of retailscapes as a performed network space. Central to this framework are the notions of socio-materiality and performativity.

First is the issue of socio-material space. Drawing on Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and other posthumanist influences, geographers have longed discussed the heterogeneity of spatiality and have approached space/place as socio-material constructs (Bakker and Bridge, 2006; Braun, 2005; Castree and MacMillan, 2001; Murdoch, 2006; Thrift, 1996). Influenced by ANT, these geographers see space as relational, constructed within heterogeneous networks (Murdoch, 1998). Space is from this perspective “made up of a host of elements that we tend to label technical, social, natural, political and so on” (Murdoch, 1998). The task of the researcher becomes then to “analyse how social and material processes (subjects, objects and relations) become seamlessly entwined within complex sets of association” (Murdoch, 1998: 359). Following this notion of network space, retailscapes are here neither purely technical/material constructs nor purely cultural constructs: they are socio-material. Thus, by retailscape, we mean the totality of a retail site’s socio-material assemblage (Fuentes, 2014). We are referring both to the actual material artefacts and socio-technical systems materialized in stores, high streets, and online sites, and to the ideas, meanings, and understandings connected to this material infrastructure. Retailscapes, like space/place in general, are heterogeneous entities, both social and material (Murdoch, 2006).

Second, but equally important, space is here seen as performed. While it might be tempting to think that “space comes before us, that it is a neutral container within which our bodies [or objects] happen to exist” (Law, 2002: 96), relational geographers have long insisted that space/place is performed (Massey, 2004; Murdoch, 2006; Thrift, 1996). Spatial formations, they assure us, are thus made in practice but also shape practice (Thrift, 1996). In line with this, we contend that retailscapes, as socio-material assemblages, do not simply exist but have to be made. Retailscapes, as we conceptualize them, are performed relational spaces (Mol and Law, 1994; Murdoch, 1998; Thrift, 1996). Retailscapes, whether these are stores, websites, smartphones, or something else, are then made in an array of activities, and the performance of these activities is also needed for their continued existence. Taking such an approach to retailscapes allows us to consider the ways retailscapes (of various sorts) unfold as activities are performed and socio-material links are forged. In the localities constituting stores (and other retail sites), activities of various actors – such as store designers, shop assistants, and shoppers – intersect, overlap, and interact, forming and reforming the retailscape.

Because retailscapes are relational and performed, they have no clear boundaries, or rather they have shifting boundaries. A retailscape is remade with each (retail and shopping) activity – different elements are “activated” in different performances and are also interconnected differently. The remaking of the retailscape assemblage therefore also means a re-drawing of its boundaries. From this perspective, the retailscape is not a singular space but rather made up of “a number of co-existing space-times” (Murdoch, 1998: 360).

This also means that retailscapes, like other socio-spatial formations, are in a continuous state of flux (Thrift, 1996). Although, of

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