

The Concept of Place in Marketing Theory and Research

Place 'is not just a thing in the world but a way of understanding the world' (Cresswell, 2004, p. 11). Thus, place does not merely designate a particular location on the surface of the earth, but is also a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the interplay between people and their environment (Sherry, 1998). In this way, place is distinguished from *space*, which can be conceptualised in more abstract terms: thus, place is a portion of space which is given meaning through human agency.

In reviewing the history of the idea of place, Cresswell identifies three levels at which the concept of place is approached. Firstly, a *descriptive* (or ideographic) approach 'most closely resembles the common-sense idea of the world being a set of places each of which can be studied as a unique and particular entity'. This approach is concerned with place distinctiveness/particularity. He argues that the second, *social constructionist*, approach is still concerned with place particularity, but only in terms of illustrating more general underlying social processes: in other words, conceptualising place largely in terms of settings for the social interaction that occurs therein. The third, *phenomenological*, approach 'is less concerned with 'places' and more interested in 'Place'', in that it 'seeks to define the essence of human existence as one that is necessarily and importantly 'in-place'' (2004, p. 51). Here, the importance of the temporal should be acknowledged (see Pred, 1984), in that everyday practices occurring within a place over time can create a local 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 1977), and the consequent 'sense of place' 'reinforces the social-spatial definition of place from the inside' (Agnew, 1987, p. 27), potentially creating identification – and a perceived feeling of attachment - between an individual and the place they inhabit.

Moving to consider place and space with regard to marketing, if we adopt a more overt spatial perspective then the concept of place is implicit - or indeed, in some particular contexts, quite explicit – and this is evident in much research within the marketing domain. For example, markets for goods and services are often overtly defined in spatial terms, as are some parameters for defining the scope of many research projects. In this virtual special issue, we consider these issues in terms of place as *subject-object* and place as *context*, which we will briefly expand upon below, introducing six papers from *Marketing Theory*, which we feel exemplify these dimensions.

Regarding place as subject-object, increasingly places at all spatial scales (but especially cities and nations) are acknowledged as 'products' that can be marketed to various target audiences (such as tourists, potential inward investors and residents etc.). The growth of place marketing, and latterly place branding, as a practice, and as a subject of academic research is perhaps the most obvious exemplar of this tendency. *Marketing Theory* has published a number of papers relating to this marketing sub-discipline, which perhaps most closely approximates to the descriptive approach to the study of place mentioned above. Interestingly, all the papers featuring a focus on 'place as subject-object' were published in 2013, perhaps indicative of the topic's increasing importance among marketing academics. Our first paper by Wood and Ball (2013) signifies the emergence of place branding within marketing theory and reflects upon the development of the 'brandscape' – a marketing term which merges the brand concept with landscape. Drawing from a range of disciplines, the study advances place branding theory by conceptualising the 'brandscape' as a 'new mode of ordering that seeks to simultaneously construct space and subjectivity'. The authors appeal to marketers to engage more fully with desire and its management, as the brandscape provides a 'potential vehicle for profound transformation'. Our second paper by Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) argues that the place branding literature to date has not revealed the complexity of place identity and therefore inhibits the potential of place branding. Drawing on organisational identity literature and place branding, the authors advocate a more dynamic view of place identity that reveals identity as an ongoing dialogue between the internal and external. To progress place branding theory, calls are made to examine place culture in greater depth. In addition, greater clarification of the role of stakeholders and their involvement in co-creating the place brand is called for. Warnaby and Medway (2013) continue this conversation in the context of place marketing. Drawing on a case study of the 'I Love Manchester' campaign after the 2011 riots in the city, the authors consider the concept of 'places as products' and the construction of place narratives. In revealing the 'complex' and 'slippery' nature of place, the authors conclude by drawing on the more social constructionist and phenomenological dimensions of place (Cresswell, 2004), revealing places to be a dynamic, co-created 'product which we do' – as well as one that is created from multiple narratives. Thus, to develop further the commodification of places, the authors call for a more in-depth, bottom-up, approach to stakeholder consultations by place marketers.

Social constructionist and phenomenological perspectives are arguably more central to studies of place as context, linked to Cresswell and Hoskins' (2008) suggestion that the notion of place simultaneously evokes two elements: (1) materiality (in that a place has tangible form, manifested by administrative boundaries, topography, built environment etc.); and (2) a 'less concrete' realm of meaning, in terms of what people do, say and feel about a specific location. Thus, research where particular places (or types of places) are regarded as settings within which the social relations taking place therein are investigated in

detail, or within which the production and consumption of meaning occurs. Certainly, our fourth paper instigates such discussions within *Marketing Theory*, by examining the production and consumption of visual meaning from the Age of Enlightenment. Here, de Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan (2010) focus on how cultural perception and interpretations interact via a 'lens of visibility'. Within the historical setting of The French Garden and The Molyneux Man, the authors advance place theory by considering conceptualisations of space and establishing how vista and public space could be employed to symbolise 'desired shifts in the collective view'. The importance of this study is particularly relevant given the increasingly visual nature of the Marketing discipline. Within the context of place marketing literature, our next paper by Oakes and Warnaby (2011) examines the transformative capabilities of outdoor music upon urban environments. Drawing on jazz performances within St. Ann's Square in Manchester, the authors develop place theory further by characterising how musical spaces influence urban square dynamics as well as highlight potential benefits to the local economy, sociospatial relations and widening arts engagement. In combining the elements of materiality and realm of meaning, our final paper by Hirschman, Ruvio and Belk (2012) explores the liminality of space and place within the micro-spatial context of the domestic garage. As part of this dialectical relationship between space and individuals (and/or families), the authors corroborate the multiple roles that liminal spaces perform in relation to the management of their belongings and their meanings. Consequently, the authors call for an expanded view which recognises that 'all matter and spaces themselves pass through transitions' and not just people. Calls are made to progress this work further by exploring the nature of liminal spaces across other cultures.

In summary, this virtual special issue highlights that place is increasingly used as a keyword in marketing theory and research. The selected papers illuminate how place has begun to be explicitly addressed as both the subject-object and context of consumption. There is considerable scope for further studies that move beyond descriptive, social constructionist and phenomenological approaches to consider their intersections and interconnections as well as complementary approaches such as feminist and contextualist-performative ones (Harris, 2010).

References

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