



Introduction

Economic Geography and Business Networks: Creating a Dialogue between Disciplines An Introduction to the Special Issue



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ABSTRACT

This introductory article presents an outline of the papers accepted for this special issue. The Guest Editors provide an overview of the work within industrial marketing where synthesis between economic geography and industrial marketing literature has occurred. A discussion of the most synthesised areas of economic geography is advanced and each article is then discussed, compared and contrasted with other articles in the special issue and with articles within industrial marketing that have previously synthesized concepts drawn from economic geography. Within this narrative, the Guest Editor's propose an agenda for future interdisciplinary research at what they refer to as the 'nexus of interest' between the disciplines.

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1. Introduction

The motivation for this special issue (SI) derives from the Guest Editors' shared interest in geographic and economic space as a relational phenomenon. In its conception, this special issue of *Industrial Marketing Management* highlights the strides being made by the international business community to assimilate work drawn from economic geography and indeed take the work of international business into economic geography journals. A special session at the 2013 Academy of International Business (AIB) Conference in 2013 chaired by Ram Mudambi focused on the potential of the collaboration between international business and economic geography brought the potential of assimilation between economic geography and industrial marketing into sharp focus. The session at the AIB conference in 2013 was chaired by Ram Mudambi and it is our pleasure to have him as an invited guest author in this special issue.

Our stated aim for this issue is to *create a dialogue between disciplines*, and we hope to have achieved that in several ways. First, we have included papers that draw on concepts from both disciplines and from the core economic geography journals. Second, is the inclusion of contributions from author teams representing both industrial marketing and economic geography scholars. Third, we attempted to have at least one economic geographer as a reviewer in each review team. There were some 'interesting' theoretical debates between reviewers as well as between authors and reviewers in these exchanges. Clashes on underlying assumptions were evident in a number of papers.

The possibility of the special issue was first voiced at the IMP conference in Atlanta 2013. It was apparent at that time that a small group of industrial marketing scholars had begun to engage with economic geography concepts and from journals such as *Economic Geography*, the *Journal of Economic Geography*, *Environment and Planning A*, *Local Economy*, *Papers in Regional Studies*, the *Annals of Regional Science*, *Regional*

Studies and *European Planning Studies*. When considering this proposition, we looked at the extent to which industrial marketing scholars were explicitly drawing on economic geography literature. Using search criteria based on the names of key economic journals, or interdisciplinary journals in which economic geography scholars regularly publish, we identified only a small amount of literature synthesis taking place. This seemed to be odd as there appeared to us to be overwhelming similarities between the conceptual areas being examined. For instance, network concepts appear strongly in all three literatures, (economic geography, international business, and industrial marketing) as do discussions on regional innovation, multinational firms, internationalization and emerging markets. Indeed, these areas seem to form a nexus of common interests and we resolved to launch a call targeted at this nexus.

Our introduction to the special issue is structured as follows: firstly, we outline for industrial marketing scholars, the areas within economic geography that have so far drawn attention from industrial marketing scholars over recent years and more specifically within this special issue. We provide a brief review of these areas and then present an outline of each of the nine papers in this special issue; we attempt to compare and contrast these papers whilst also identifying what we feel are future areas of synthesis at the nexus of interest.

2. Industrial Marketing and Economic Geography: A dialogue between disciplines?

At the time that the call was raised for this special issue, only a small number of papers in industrial marketing had made explicit reference to the economic geography literature when making contributions within the core industrial marketing journals. We were able to identify only 12 papers pre-2013 where there had been cross-citation. For instance, Cantù (2010), had drawn on economic geography concepts of proximity

when studying the role of different proximity patterns on regional innovation patterns. Similarly, Eklinder-Frick et al., (2011, 2014) drew on notions of proximity from the economic geography literature to explore regional strategic networks and particularly examine the role of bridging and bonding social capital. Felzensztein et al., (2010) had drawn on these concepts to examine cluster formation and functioning. There seemed therefore to be a focus for industrial marketing scholars at that time on studying co-location. However, Tunisini et al., (2011) had also drawn on some economic geography work when beginning to explore the global-local connections between places as linked to other distant places. Equally Ellis et al., (2011) also drew on economic geography concepts when studying export intensity of emerging market exporters. These works therefore seemed to look at the local dimension of geography in conjunction with the international dimension.

Some of the discussion in an AIB special session in Istanbul in 2013 mirrored the comments of a lead to a special issue of which Ram Mudambi was a Co-Editor in 2010 (Beugelsdijk et al., 2010:488). In drawing up the call for papers, we were encouraged at that time by the following passage in that lead article.

"It is still fair to say, however, that when it comes to location behaviour, one of the major remaining weaknesses of the convergence of the economics, geography, regional science, strategy and IB literatures, is that none of these streams of research explicitly focuses on how the firm's organizational characteristics relate to the firm's fundamental geographical characteristics, both within and between countries, because the role of the firm in space is rarely the main object of study [...]. Notwithstanding the important contributions that NEG [New Economic Geography] and firm heterogeneity studies have made to our understanding of multinational activity, MNEs are still basically portrayed in geographical space as independent units agglomerating in certain locations, leaving the nature of the interaction between places and space as a black box" (Beugelsdijk et al., 2010:488).

Much of the work by industrial marketing researchers and particularly within the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group (IMP) has had a profound interest in micro-level interaction — that we propose may aid the more meso- and macro-level insights available at EG/IB nexus. Equally, the focus on interdependencies in the actor-resources-activities (ARA) model within the IMP tradition would seem to have much to offer in penetrating this 'black box' of interaction between places and space, given that individual actors are the facilitators of this interaction. In their seminal outline of the principles of relational economic geography in the *Journal of Economic Geography*, Bathelt and Glückler (2003:123) suggest that "this approach emphasizes that the economic actors themselves produce their own regional environments." Therefore, there seems much that the toolbox of industrial marketing scholars can add to the confluence of ideas between disciplines considering the interaction between place and space. In 2013, an observable assimilation was the particular strand of relational economic geography (Bathelt & Glückler, 2003; Boggs & Rantisi, 2003; Capello & Faggian, 2005) being drawn on to compliment relational perspectives within industrial marketing traditions (Eklinder-Frick et al., 2014; Nicholson et al., 2013). 'Relational' in the context of relational economic geography can be understood as a:

"...specific mode of economic coordination that is based on strong ties and long-term reciprocal relationships". Typically, these relationships are described as informal, face-to-face, collaborative and cooperative and are characterized by the exchange of knowledge and high degrees of mutual trust" (Sunley, 2008:4).

We note the continuing influence of citations in this issue between concepts drawn from the relational economic geography paradigm. We are privileged to have Harald Bathelt as a contributing author in one of the papers in this issue.

A second school of thought from economic geography that has influenced authors in this special issue is that of evolutionary economic geography (Boschma & Frenken, 2006; Boschma & Martin, 2010). Evolutionary economic geography draws inspiration from breakthroughs in the parent discipline of evolutionary economics (Nelson & Winter, 1982).

"Evolutionary Economic Geography aims to understand the spatial distribution of routines over time. It is especially interested in analysing the creation and diffusion of new routines in space, and the mechanisms through which the diffusion of 'fitter' routines occurs" (Boschma & Frenken, 2006:278).

They propose that a further 'turn' in economic geography was needed which has been turned evolutionary economic geography. Ron Boschma's work has influenced a number of papers in this special issue. Boschma has highlighted (2005b:62) a strong need to "isolate analytically, the effect of geographical proximity from other forms of proximity" and suggest four additional non-mutually exclusive dimensions of proximity and distance; cognitive, social, organizational and institutional. The underlying meanings in these conceptualisations should be very familiar to industrial marketing scholars and we found it at the time of writing the call for papers to be surprising, that there had historically been so limited assimilation between the bodies of work. There seems much more that can be achieved in respect of the dynamics of actors in time and space by combining the micro-level perspectives and mature insights into time and process drawn from industrial marketing scholarship with work from evolutionary economic geography. The papers in the special issue are significant contributions in themselves and also mark a step towards defining an 'agenda' for future research in IM. We note that the two natural areas for synthesis identified by contributing scholars are within the relational and evolutionary 'turns' in economic geography.

The value of assimilation between economic geography and industrial marketing concepts and ideas would seem to be several fold. First, is the intellectual stimulation available by working with new concepts and frameworks. Very recently, the outgoing Editor in Chief of this journal, Peter LaPlaca, at the IMP conference in Poznan Poland, made a call for a broad extension of the boundaries of both the IMP body of thought and ideas and the boundaries of industrial marketing scholarship. Second, and more pragmatically, economic geography is represented by several very highly ranked journals covering topics, as we argue, of very similar concern to industrial marketing scholars. This offers the potential for a number of unutilized outlets for industrial marketing thoughts and ideas. A third potential benefit is the cross-citation of industrial marketing work and economic geography work which enhances the rankings of journals. There has been much discussion of the work of the marketing discipline to suggest concerns about the lack of impact that our ideas have outside the boundaries of the discipline and increased attempts at interdisciplinary synthesis may be fruitful in gaining an increased audience for ideas originating in the field of industrial marketing.

We next present a short review of each of the nine papers in this special issue and we compare on contrast their approaches and conclusions with a view to also presenting a research agenda going forward.

3. The papers selected for this special issue

We are pleased to have a first *competitive* paper from Jan-Åke Törnroos, Aino Halinen and Chris Medlin (2017). These authors have made some of the most important contributions to the discussion of time is process theory within the management disciplines (Halinen, 1998; Halinen et al., 2012, 2013; Halinen & Törnroos, 1995; Medlin, 2004; Medlin & Törnroos, 2014). It is from this vantage point that we feel their perspective on time is an important contribution to conceptualisations of time and space in industrial marketing research.

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