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Theorizing temporary spatial clusters and institutional boundary-work in industrial marketing

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ABSTRACT

To better understand the nature of temporary spatial clusters (TSCs) in industrial marketing settings, this conceptual paper first provides a theoretical synthesis of spatial understanding from the industrial marketing (IM) and economic geography (EG) fields, focusing particularly on Doreen Massey's work on relational space. This leads to a conceptual schema for organizing the IM literature in terms of spatiality, and which also helps clarify the ontological nature of TSCs. We then move to introduce the notion of institutional boundary-work, drawing on the work of Thomas Gieryn, and Andrea Brighenti's examination of territorology, to conceptualize the activities of market actors engaged in the ongoing social accomplishment of TSCs. Such activities, we suggest, involve these actors 'marching' boundaries to assume network influence and maintain market order in IM settings. In summary, therefore, our paper addresses two fundamental questions: i) How do we conceptualize the form of TSCs in IM settings? And, ii) what function(s) are TSCs performing (and how is this being undertaken) in IM? The paper closes by providing methodological guidance for how a research agenda on TSCs within IM activity might be developed, followed by a summary of the managerial implications that emerge from our theorizations.

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1. Introduction

Spatial and temporal perspectives on business relationships have been discussed for some time in the industrial marketing (IM) literature (Andersson & Mattsson, 2010; Araujo & Easton, 2012; Håkansson & Lundgren, 1997; Halinen & Törnroos, 1995; Halinen, Medlin, & Törnroos, 2012; Hedaa & Törnroos, 2008; Medlin, 2004; Tidström & Hagberg-Andersson, 2012). Equally, in economic geography (EG) there have been efforts to theorize the spatiality of industrial markets (Brenner, 1999; Conradson, 2003; Ettliger, 2004; Faulconbridge, 2006; Gertler, 1995; Glennie & Thrift, 1996; Hughes, 1999; Marsden, Harrison, & Flynn, 1998; Murphy, 2003). However, the fields of IM and EG are rarely integrated, aside from a few exceptions (see Halinen et al., 2012; Nicholson, Brennan, & Midgley, 2014; Nicholson, Tsagdis, & Brennan, 2013). Indeed, much of the intellectual complementarity and potential cross-fertilization between these two areas remains unexplored (see Palmer, Owens, & Sparks, 2006). We suggest that this is especially the case when considering temporary networks of actors in business settings; a phenomenon that others broadly identify as undertheorized (Rinallo & Golfetto, 2011).

In IM, such temporary arrangements have been referred to as 'event-based business networks' (Hedaa & Törnroos, 2008), and in EG, the term 'temporary spatial clusters' (TSCs) (Rinallo & Golfetto, 2011) has been used, which we also adopt in this paper. This contrasts with more permanent networks of market exchange recognized by IM and EG scholars in the form of inter-firm and actor agglomeration, typically within the context of innovation and knowledge clusters (see, for example, Bathelt, Malmberg, & Maskell, 2004; Corsaro, Ramos, Henneberg, & Naudé, 2012; Pinch, Henry, Jenkins, & Tallman, 2003). In their most visible and material form, temporary spatial clusters would include the gathering of IM actors at trade fairs, exhibitions and conventions (Bathelt & Schuldt, 2008; Maskell, Bathelt, & Malmberg, 2004, 2006; Sarmiento, Simões, & Farhangmehr, 2015); supplier workshops (Palmer, Simmons, Robinson, & Fearn, 2015); planned round-table discussions, presentations, industrial buyer visits and facility tours (Palmer & O'Kane, 2007); corporate hospitality functions (Bennett, 2003; Crowley, 1991); and scientific or technical conferences or festivals (Bultitude, McDonald, & Custead, 2011). However, our paper demonstrates that any understanding of TSCs needs to be far more nuanced and complex, incorporating abstract as well as tangible elements.

We suggest that IM and EG literatures can be combined to provide a new lens through which to explore spatiality and, specifically, TSCs within IM settings. The discussion initially identifies one of strengths of the IM literature: its tradition of understanding network relationships 'beyond the dyad' (Håkansson & Johanson, 1992), and how issues of

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space and time have been considered in this respect. Despite such insights, it is argued that the literature remains relatively silent on TSCs, not only in terms of what such spaces consist of and the nature of their actor interactions, but also the actual work undertaken therein. We believe TSCs have an ability to shape and facilitate wider business relationships in IM settings, and posit that they can be better understood through the application of geographical theory in the form of Doreen Massey's ideas on relational spatiality (Massey, 2005), as well as concepts from social theory which help inform the notion of institutional boundary-work – specifically the work of Thomas Gieryn (Gieryn, 1983, 1999) and Andrea Brighenti (Brighenti, 2010). In undertaking such a synthesis we address two fundamental research questions: i) How do we conceptualize the form of TSCs in IM settings? And, ii) what function(s) are TSCs performing (and how is this being undertaken) in IM? Our work therefore responds to recent calls in IM for stronger theory development (Möller, 2013).

To summarize, there is a relative absence of discussions regarding TSCs in existing IM research, and the work of Massey, Gieryn and Brighenti is, we suggest, critical to developing theory and understanding in this area. As such, our paper makes a number of contributions. The first is identifying that for a fuller understanding of the formation and development of relational exchanges in IM settings, we should examine those interstices of spatial interaction (both material and abstract) that evade rigid temporal fixing. Bringing space into IM in this manner theoretically spans and links many unseen, and often seemingly mundane, institutionally arrangements as sites for network influence and market order.

Second, we build on Hedaa and Törnroos' (2008: 324) idea that “event networks are time-based connected event relationships”, by providing a theoretical distinction between the temporal and the temporary in respect of space within IM settings. This extends a line of work (see Corsaro & Snehota, 2012; Tidström & Hagberg-Andersson, 2012) implying temporariness and, arguably, ‘space on the move’. Temporariness brings to the fore the idea of layers of motion and the spatio-temporal waxing and waning of TSCs through the simultaneous mechanisms of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, as discussed by Brighenti (2010), and resulting from the interactions between IM network actors.

Third, we provide a conceptual schema for organizing the IM literature that addresses issues of space and which clarifies the ontological nature of TSCs. This schema presents the idea of tall spatial ontologies, where the micro-level depends hierarchically on larger macro structures or systems, versus flat spatial ontologies, in which the network relationships can be conceived as stretching out sideways or horizontally (Schatzki, 2010). The schema also presents a way of thinking about IM relationships beyond spatial imagery that is fixed, or what can be referred to as a ‘sedentary logic’, and considers space in a more mobile sense incorporating a ‘nomadic logic’ (Bauman, 2000; Cresswell, 2006; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Lastly, our paper provides a fine-grained theoretical analysis of the specific workings and related dynamism in an IM network in terms of TSCs. The insights relating to institutional boundary-work open up new ways of understanding the activities of market actors engaged in the ongoing social accomplishment of TSCs. This, we suggest, involves actors ‘marching’¹ boundaries to assume network influence and

maintain market order in IM settings, by way of organizing, working, re-producing and maintaining those market institutions (Palmer & O’Kane, 2007; Palmer et al., 2015).

We begin with a brief overview of the work in IM on space and time. Subsequently, we integrate a specific stream of EG research – Doreen Massey's ideas on relational space – to help develop an understanding of TSCs. A synthesis of both the IM and EG fields is then provided, along with a conceptual schema for organizing the IM literature that addresses spatiality. Following this, Thomas Gieryn's notion of boundary-work and Andrea Brighenti's discussion of territorology are outlined to better understand the institutional boundary-work undertaken in TSCs. Finally, we provide some methodological suggestions on how TSCs may be effectively researched by IM scholars, along with some managerial implications from our theoretical analysis.

2. Perspectives on space and time in industrial marketing research

The specific characteristics of business markets – where exchange transactions occur between networks of business actors (typically buyers and sellers) – are well documented in the IM literature, particularly through the work of the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Group (Axelsson & Easton, 1992; Håkansson & Johanson, 1992; Håkansson & Snehota, 1989). The spatiality of these industrial networks within which network actors might be co-located, has, for the most part, been approached from a Cartesian and bounded perspective, in the context of, inter alia, countries (Baum, Calabrese, & Silverman, 2000), regions (Eklinder-Frick, Eriksson, & Hallén, 2011, 2012; Fischer & Varga, 2002) and science parks (Corsaro et al., 2012). Beyond this line of work, the IM tradition has, in some cases, taken interest in more nuanced understandings of space. For example, work on position in industrial networks (Henders, 1992; Mattsson & Johanson, 1992) hints at the relational space that can emerge through the vectorial interplay of actors in different network positions. Additionally, another area of work on network horizons (see, for example, Anderson, Håkansson, & Johanson, 1994; Holmen & Pedersen, 2003; Salmi, Havila, & Anderson, 2001) employs an inherently spatial metaphor to ‘get to grips’ with the idea that actors within business networks have a bounded knowledge, awareness and understanding of their relationships with others, the limits of which represent a given actor's network horizon, and beyond which the wider business environment (in which individual actors are not identified) begins. There are similarities here with more recent work on network pictures, which visually capture mental configurations of relational space (Colville & Pye, 2010; Henneberg, Mouzas, & Naudé, 2006; Mouzas, Henneberg, & Naudé, 2008; Rohrmus & Henneberg, 2006), although usually at a given point in time (eschewing a more overt longitudinal temporal perspective). More recently, Nicholson et al. (2013) have acknowledged the importance of relational space in their development of notions of relational proximation (and distanciation and isolation) to examine actor relationships in IM networks. Overall, however, the IM literature appears to favor Cartesian conceptualizations of space, where it might be conceived of as a surface, and equated with maps, grids or landscape (Massey, 2005), rather than treating space from a more relational perspective.

Time is often considered alongside space in the IM literature. For example, Henders (1992); cited in Anderson, Havila, Andersen, & Halinen, 1998) recognizes that the spatiality of IM actors' network positions can have a dynamic dimension as the nature of their interactions shift temporally. There is also an increasing body of conceptual and empirical work (Andersson & Mattsson, 2010; Araujo & Easton, 2012; Corsaro & Snehota, 2012; Halinen et al., 2012; Halinen & Törnroos, 1995; Hedaa & Törnroos, 2008; Medlin, 2004; Tidström & Hagberg-Andersson, 2012) within the IM literature stream that clearly addresses how space and time dimensions simultaneously shape network outcomes. Medlin (2004) refers to time as a container for business relationships as well as a measure. Andersson and Mattsson (2010) refer to temporality in terms of resource adjustment to business lifecycles. Araujo and

¹ We adopt the term ‘marching’ in the usual sense of the verb. However, we would also like to make a link to the noun ‘march’, derived from the Old English word *mearc*, denoting a borderland or ‘sign of a boundary’ between two centers of power, which might itself be disputed. Thus, our specific use of the term marching represents an understanding that boundaries that are marched need not be absolute or exclusively defined, and that they do not necessarily relate to unchanging or fixed spatial understandings. Rather, we are attempting to emphasize the malleable possibilities of boundary marching practices that may be passive, unconscious or automatic; producing signs of demarcation that are less visible or traceable, but are nonetheless manifest. Put differently, a boundary only becomes a boundary in relation to the people or actors who actively (re)create and experience it. Thus, we argue boundaries are socially constructed through marching practices.

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