



The dark side of place attachment: Why do customers avoid their treasured stores? ☆

Sevgin Eroglu^a, Géraldine Michel^{b,*}

^a Marketing at Georgia State University, 35 Broad Street, Atlanta, GA, USA

^b Marketing at IAE Paris, Sorbonne Business School, Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne, 12 rue Jean Antoine de Baïf 75013, Paris, France

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ABSTRACT

While there is extensive literature on consumers' attraction to their treasured commercial places, we have little understanding of the “dark side” of these close relationships within the retail context. Drawing on the notion of *interdependent freedom* and using the introspection methodology, this study demonstrates how customers lose their sense of interdependent freedom in the favored stores, and ultimately reduce, or altogether avoid their patronage over time. Specifically, the findings display the constraints and coping strategies customers use to protect their interdependent freedom in these venues by: (1) Creating occasions that enable giving back to the treasured place, (2) Carving their own territories therein, and (3) Calibrating the timing of their patronage. The results also identify two critical factors that influence perceptions of interdependent freedom in the retail landscape: (1) Benevolent attention associated with weak relationships, and (2) Security associated with flexibility.

“When you know the salesperson all too well, almost in the intimacy, it begins to feel like you no longer go to a store, but to someone... then, I begin to feel constrained in some ways, not free anymore...I feel a little bit scrutinized ...thus, nowadays, I go in there only when I am totally sure I will buy I do not want to be embarrassed by leaving without a purchase....”

1. Introduction

The role of space and place in modern society is undergoing fundamental change in today's globalized information society (Castree, 2009; Herod, 2009). In particular, the retail venues have evolved to become multi-purpose providers that meet diverse, complex, and often conflicting consumer needs. The modern retail landscape seeks to join the category of sacred and significant spaces, such as when Starbucks promises to be “a home away from home.” as such retailing's role in meeting consumers' sociocultural needs has substantial academic and managerial importance.

Marketing literature shows strong evidence for the significant, positive influence of social interactions in commercial domains between consumers and employees (Brady & J. Joseph Cronin Jr., 2001; Donovan et al., 1994; Grewal et al., 2003; Hedrick et al., 2006; Price & Arnould, 1999) or among consumers (Bitner, 1992; Grove & Fisk, 1997;

McGrath & Otnes, 1995). Specifically, the sense of being welcomed, friendliness, and empathy powerfully influence perceived service quality, satisfaction, and loyalty in retail settings (Brady & J. Joseph Cronin Jr., 2001; Parasuraman et al., 2004; Price & Arnould, 1999). Feeling at home and secure with familiar company (McCracken, 1989), social mixing (Sarkissian, 1976), space sharing (Griffiths & Gilly, 2012a), and finding a third place with opportunities to “build consensus” (Oldenburg, 1999), have notable psychological and behavioral consequences in commercial settings. Research is also focusing on factors that influence consumer place attachment (e.g. Brocato et al., 2015; DeBenedetti, Oppewal, & Arsel, 2014; Johnstone, 2012), including how consumption of space may stimulate social interaction among customers (e.g. Bradford & Sherry, 2015; Rosenbaum, 2006; Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2007).

While there is extensive literature on consumers' attraction to their favored commercial places, we have little understanding of the “dark side” of these close relationships within the retail context. In marketing, the examination of this “dark” side is rather scant and typically investigated outside of the retail context (Grayson & Ambler, 1999; Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992; Anderson & Jap, 2005). For example, research reveals some unpleasant shades of close relationships between firms and their suppliers (Anderson & Jap, 2005) and identifies the fine line in executing relational communications in the

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: seroglu@gsu.edu (S. Eroglu), michel.iae@univ-paris1.fr (G. Michel).

multichannel context (Godfrey et al., 2011). Most research on consumer patronage termination focuses on the antecedents and consequences of the avoidance behaviors for retailers who no longer meet the customers' demands due to firm-based shortcomings (e.g., stock-outs: Sloat et al., 2005) or consumer-based factors such as variety-seeking (Jung & Yoon, 2012; Kahn, 1995). To sum, within the specific context of retail setting, our knowledge on the limits of close relationships and their “dark side” is very scant. To date, we have little understanding of why individuals who are attached to a store, begin to avoid it over time even when they continue to respect its performance, and switch to other alternatives that are much less satisfactory than their treasured stores.

Our central research question focuses on this complex and counter-intuitive interplay between consumer affect and avoidance behaviors exhibited in retail patronage. Specifically, we explore the underlying dynamics of consumers' “dark” relationships with their “treasured” commercial places (as termed by Debenedetti et al., 2014). In particular, we examine the manifestation of this engagement over time and uncover the reasons for defections from the valued retail establishments even when they are still regarded as “the” most treasured places. To address these questions, we draw from the literature on the concept of conviviality and its central notion, *interdependent freedom*, introduced and defined by Illich (1973, 7) as “individual freedom realized in personal interdependence”. Based on the introspection methodology, our research explicates how customers can lose their sense of interdependent freedom in the treasured commercial places, and thus choose to reduce or altogether avoid their patronage over time. Our results highlight three groups of findings. First, we uncover the major types of constraints that these patrons perceive as inhibiting their interdependent freedom in the previously cherished venues as: (1) Constraints to giving back to the treasured place, (2) Constraints to fully participating in the life of the treasured place, and (3), Constraints to protecting the treasured place. Second, our results display three types of *strategies* patrons use to protect their interdependent freedom in the treasured place by: (1) Creating occasions that enable giving back to the treasured place, (2) Carving their own territories therein, and (3) Calibrating the timing of their patronage. Finally, our research identifies two critical influencers of interdependent freedom perceptions in the retail space: (1) Benevolent attention associated with weak relationships, and (2) Safety associated with flexibility.

Our research contributes to the consumer-commercial environment interaction literature in two ways. First, we explore the “dark” dynamics of patronage, namely, avoidance behavior, a phenomenon which has not yet been studied within the retail context. Second, we do this with a conceptual perspective that extends the existing work on the theories of freedom and sharing in the marketing literature. Toward this end, we use the interdependent freedom concept as the basis of our framework and employ it as the unifying thread that integrates different conceptual premises. More specifically, this study complements the existing research on place attachment (Altman & Low, 1992; Debenedetti et al., 2014; Lewicka, 2011; Scannell & Gifford, 2010) by highlighting the dark side of a strong place affection with an eye on the temporal progression of this relationship.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Social interactions in the marketplace

Commercial exchanges in the marketplace have always been social occasions. Prior research uses several terms to describe the ingrained social quality of the commercial exchange process, particularly in retail contexts, including “social centrality” (Lefebvre, 1974), “schmoozing” spaces (Whyte, 1980), the “linking value” of the commercial venues (Aubert-Gamet & Cova, 1999), “behavior settings” (Barker & Garlock, 1968), and the more recent “third place” (Oldenburg, 1999; Rosenbaum, 2006). In marketing, this topic mainly appears in two focal streams: service research and relationship marketing. From this

evidence, we derive that social aspects of an exchange process consist of two broad types, namely, customer–employee and customer–customer interactions as follows.

Positive social support in the marketplace may arise among customers or between customers and employees. It refers to all verbal and nonverbal communications that facilitate a service exchange by reducing customers' uncertainty, improving their self-esteem, or enhancing their feelings of connectedness with others (Adelman & Ahuvia, 1995; Adelman et al., 1994). Similarly, a neutral interaction implies influence exerted among actors, although research tends to focus mainly on influence mechanisms between customers and employees (Butcher, Sparks & O'Callaghan, 2003; Gremler & Gwinner, 2000; Gremler et al., 2001; Tsai & Huang, 2002) rather than between customers (Harris et al., 2000; Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2007). This review also reveals two knowledge gaps pertinent to our discussion about why retail patrons avoid their treasured places. First, while environmental psychology literature acknowledges the socio-physical significance of place as a specific setting with a purposeful use; it neither examines the meaning of place in commercial domains (Debenedetti et al., 2014) nor assesses occupants' conflicting desires to achieve freedom and interdependence simultaneously in these settings (Illich, 1973). Second, while marketing literature provides ample evidence of the importance of social interactions in the marketplace (notably, in retail service settings), it does not explain the contrasting desires of retail consumers who seek to feel welcome and important but simultaneously refuse to relinquish their freedom. To address these gaps, we now turn to the literature on sharing which provides an insightful conceptual framework to draw from.

2.2. Sharing in the retail space

In his multidisciplinary exploration of sharing, Belk (2010) concludes that this fundamental, yet pervasive, consumption phenomenon is an overlooked construct, whose potential contribution to consumer behavior theory remains largely unrecognized. He examines the macro and micro manifestations of sharing at various levels of society and identifies it as a powerful phenomenon that can create solidarity and bonding. The sharing construct comprises three main dimensions: possessiveness, privacy, and interdependence/independence. Its foundations are rooted in prototypes such as mothering/caring and the pooling and allocation of resources, and its dominant characteristics include social links, non-ceremonious contexts, social reproduction, and a lack of forced compliance.

In a creative application of sharing to the space domain, Griffiths and Gilly (2012a) extend this thinking to the exterior world of the marketplace and propose that personal space, ownership, and territoriality also strongly influence the sharing of space. In space sharing, the authors recognize shifts in the underlying prototypes, such as from mothering to hosting or from pooling and allocation of household resources to divvying up available space. They still conceptualize the space sharing phenomenon as non-ceremonial (with contextual norms) and located in a public domain (third place or service-scape), where the purchases grant occupancy rights to the occupants who likely are unknown to one another but are expected to exhibit courtesy and civility. However, the authors emphasize the contrast between the unencumbered social interaction at home (as explored by Belk, 2010) and the interactions that take place in public domains, where social mixing ensues (Sarkissian, 1976). Through social mixing, occupants intermingle without regard to differences in their demographics (e.g., social class, education, gender), though this intermingling also gets challenged at certain times. For example, when occupants are well-versed in the “etiquette and efficacy” of sharing space, they might not welcome newcomers (“intruders”) who are poorly proficient in the focal culture (Griffiths & Gilly, 2012a, 17).

Finally, sharing in the public space shows consumers' competing desires to simultaneously experience privacy and plurality in the retail environment. In the context of place attachment, individuals find these

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