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An integrative perspective of closeness in retailing: From retailers' sense-giving to consumers' sense-making

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the concept of closeness in retailing. While previous research on closeness has tended to adopt only consumers' point of view, in-depth interviews with managers and customers of a French supermarket chain show that both parties interpret and define closeness differently. Analysis reveals that “store closeness” comprises a complex set of meanings that are not limited to a geographical notion but rather encompass functional, relational, and integration notions. Furthermore, retailers define store closeness very broadly, which contributes to nurturing their positioning but also leads them to idealize their role in the marketplace. In contrast, consumers' definition of store closeness is more limited and mainly focuses on the functional features of the store, thus highlighting a discrepancy between retailers' sense-giving and consumers' sense-making.

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1. Introduction

> *Thanks to our dynamism and our ability to innovate, we have become the leader of geographical closeness. Today, we aim at going further by focusing on relational closeness that we built with our customers. This ambition is at the heart of every project we have developed this year, and emphasizes one objective: win the hearts of city-dwellers after having invested in the hearts of cities*. (Monoprix CSR Annual Report, 2013, p. 9)

As Monoprix[1] emphasizes in its annual report, closeness is a central issue for retailers because understanding what closeness is, beyond a mere geographical notion, can help differentiate retailers in consumers' minds. In France, for example, the retailing industry is facing an increasingly competitive environment that has motivated stores to differentiate themselves from others at the local level (Chaney et al., 2015). To do so, retailers are searching for ways to build strong relationships with their customers. These relationships are reflected particularly through the desire to develop closeness with consumers (Barnes, 1997; Mende et al., 2013). Indeed, at a time when companies are becoming increasingly dematerialized and consumers are losing some geographical and temporal references through the ubiquity of communication tools (Hoffman and Novak, 1996), the strategy of getting close to consumers is a real challenge (Srivastava and Singh, 2010). Furthermore, closeness seems to be a consequence of major demographical (e.g. aging population, reduction of household size) and sociological (less time for shopping) trends of Western countries, and more specifically large cities.

From a theoretical perspective, research has shown that closeness has positive outcomes, such as enhanced consumer satisfaction (Barnes, 1997) and loyalty (Mende et al., 2013). Closeness has long been an important concept in the service and retailing literature because it plays a central role in retailer–consumer relationships (Bendapudi and Berry, 1997) and, more specifically, is considered a manifestation of specific types of relationships to places, such as place attachment (Debenedetti et al., 2014). Reibstein et al. (2009, p. 1) explain that the field of marketing is “supposed to be concerned about the connection of the firm with its customers.” However, the strength of the connection, which can be interpreted as the distance between retailers and consumers and consequently is similar to the notion of closeness, remains poorly understood. Nielson (1998, p. 454) underscores the lack of empirical examination of the concept of closeness and maintains that “the literature, both theoretical and prescriptive, has for years suggested that closeness is essential to success between partners—that it lies at the ‘heart’ of the relationship.” As a consequence, closeness is largely an underlying notion not explicitly examined in the literature.

In addition, the few works on closeness have two limitations. First, studies have addressed the concept of closeness only in a

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[1] Monoprix is a French supermarket chain with 400 stores located in French city centers. Its annual sales were €4.3 billion in 2013.

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piecemeal fashion, focusing on either geographical (Nayga and Weinberg, 1999; Swoboda et al., 2013) or relational (Barnes, 1997; Bove and Johnson, 2001; Mende et al., 2013) aspects, which leads to a fragmented landscape and calls for a more integrative perspective. Second, research has only considered closeness from consumers' perspectives. A better understanding of the concept, however, requires a dyadic perspective to highlight the potential tensions, contradictions, or discrepancies between retailers' sensegiving and consumers' sense-making, with retailers attempting to influence consumers' and other stakeholders' perceptions and understanding (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007) of their positioning in the industry. Investigating the creation of experiences in retail store environments, Bäckström and Johansson (2006) show that while retailers tend to use ever more advanced techniques to create strong in-store experiences, consumers prefer experiences based on traditional features, such as the behavior of the personnel, a satisfactory assortment, and a store layout that facilitates the visit. Consequently, this article aims to explore the concept of store closeness from a double-sided perspective, and to emphasize how a dyadic approach contributes to a richer and more nuanced understanding of what closeness in retailing is.

The structure of this article, which highlights a growing issue in retailing, is as follows: we first present the theoretical background. Then, we describe our methods and present the results. Finally, we conclude with theoretical and managerial implications.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Closeness in environmental science

The conceptual foundations of closeness and proximity-seeking behaviors are located in the literature on place attachment in environmental science. Research on place attachment focuses on the interaction between individuals or groups and their spatial environment (Altman and Low, 1992; Scannell and Gifford, 2010). In these works, a common manifestation of place attachment is the search for geographical closeness to the place to which the individual or group has developed an emotional bond (e.g. Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001). Closeness is often implicit, and in that regard research has defined place attachment as “a positive, affective bond between an individual and a specific place, the main characteristic of which is to maintain closeness to such a place” (Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001, p. 274), which “can be expressed in part, by proximity-maintaining in concert with journeys away, place reconstruction, and relocation to similar places” (Scannell and Gifford, 2010, p. 4). Place attachment may lead to the unwillingness to substitute the focal place for another (Williams et al., 1992). All these studies put emphasis on spatial closeness between people and their cherished places. This focus can be explained by the theoretical foundation of these works, which borrow the idea of proximity-seeking behavior from research on infant–mother attachment (Bowlby, 1969)—that is, the main manifestation of attachment is young children’s search for closeness with the protecting figure of their mother. Being attached and spatially tied to their mother helps infants explore their surroundings because they have a secure base for exploration associated with care, well-being, and routine (Bowlby, 1969; 1979).

In the context of relocation of Boston’s West End inhabitants, Fried (2000) suggests a proneness to social and identity/psychological proximity that fits with Bowlby’s (1979) observation that adults develop attachment to people outside their familial circle and this extends to groups or institutions. Relationships are based on the common desire to identify with others and lead to proximity-seeking behaviors in the case of danger or disaster. This notion reveals that closeness also builds on a psychological basis, which is also hinted at in scales intended to measure place attachment. Indeed, these scales often integrate items such as “I identify strongly with [place X]” (Moore and Graefe, 1994, p. 25). Items also suggest the will to maintain spatial interactions with the place (e.g. “I wouldn’t substitute any other area for doing the type of things I do here”) (Moore and Graefe, 1994, p. 25).

The ideas of spatial and psychological connection with a place are also located in definitions of the dimensions of place attachment. These include a functional dimension (called “place dependence”) (Stockols and Schumaker, 1981), in which individuals become attached because the place satisfies their needs (e.g. the place is close or convenient), and an emotional dimension (called “place identity”) (Proshansky, 1978), which is associated with the ability of the place to be part of the individual’s identity and to provoke strong emotional feelings. Closeness should therefore also be a central issue for retailers willing to build strong relationships with their customers. With regard to the marketplace, closeness is viewed as being built on different elements; in this regard, place attachment literature in environmental sciences emphasizes two main components of closeness that are also present in spatial economics literature (e.g. Boschma, 2005): spatial closeness and psychological closeness. Both these dimensions structure how retailing addresses closeness.

2.2. Closeness in retailing

In the retailing industry, spatial closeness reflects the geographical distance between the consumer and the store. Two kinds of distances can be distinguished: the objective distance (e.g. distance covered, costs of transport) and the subjective distance (individuals' perceptions of the distance between them and the store). Thus, spatial closeness deals with the localization of the store and its accessibility (Nayga and Weinberg, 1999; Swoboda et al., 2013). The closer the store is in terms of geographical distance, travel time, and transportation costs, the more consumers will perceive it as close (Bergadaà and Del Bucchia, 2009; Herault-Fournier et al., 2014). This kind of proximity involves the notion of convenience (Seiders et al., 2007). According to Reimers and Clulow (2004), convenience occurs when the spatial, temporal, and effort costs are reduced or eliminated. Consumers develop a stronger closeness to convenient than inconvenient stores. Building on this notion, Bergadaà and Del Bucchia (2009) suggest that closeness comprises a more functional dimension—namely, consumers' search for efficiency in relation to the organization of the store. In this case, consumers feel close to a store if they can shop efficiently because of the proper management of both front and back offices (Babin et al., 1994).

Psychological or relational closeness related to the development of a relationship between the consumer and the retailer is based on the consumer’s store perception rather than on spatial aspects. The relational proximity between the store and its customers is based on trust in the retailer (Barnes, 1997; Bergadaà and Del Bucchia, 2009; Herault-Fournier et al., 2014). Relational closeness can be directed to the store personnel or the store as a whole. Regarding personnel, previous research has shown that consumers can develop a strong sense of proximity to a store by being close to its personnel (Bove and Johnson, 2001). Considering the major role of frontline employees in shaping customer relationships with the store, Crosby et al. (1990, p. 69) argue that because of his or her close proximity to the customer, the “service salesperson is often best suited to perform the role of ‘relationship manager.’” Regarding relational closeness to the store as a whole, previous research has shown that consumers can identify with store personnel (Bergadaà and Del Bucchia, 2009; Herault-Fournier et al., 2014). In this case, closeness corresponds to the shared values between the retailer and the consumer (Debenedetti et al., 2014).

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