Author(s): Horáková, Julie; Uusitalo, Outi

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9 From places to platforms

Examining the transformation of servicescapes

Julie Horáková and Outi Uusitalo

Introduction

Despite being one of the basic elements of the Marketing Mix and an important variable in creating consumers' shopping experiences, the importance and meanings of place as a multidimensional entity are often overlooked. While the potential and worth of places are acknowledged, emphasis on independence from both time and physical place that is brought by the digital era has shifted the status of place towards a background variable that merely complements the main product or service provided. Increasing attention towards the digitalisation of shopping has shifted researchers' focus towards the functions and usability of interfaces, and the role of place as a multidimensional entity is often overlooked. However, research shows that places can hold important meanings for consumers, and they strongly contribute to the creation of customer value (Brocato, Baker, and Voorhees, 2015; Johnson *et al.*, 2015; Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, the notion of retail place as a focal marketing issue is not likely to become irrelevant, even though digital technology increasingly mediates shopping and changes the shopping environment.

The DM literature has paved the way for the versatility of research of digitalisation in the context of marketplaces (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2020; Kannan and Li, 2017; Lamberton and Stephen, 2016). While the research of online retailing is proliferating, many studies have focused on the functionality of exchanges (Hagberg, Sundstrom, and Egels-Zandén, 2016). Few studies have tackled the notion of the transforming shopping environment and the special features of online shopping locations as places. One reason may be that, although online shopping and digital services have seen constant growth in recent years, the disappearance of brick-and-mortar stores in the foreseeable future seemed unimaginable. However, the COVID-19 pandemic that hit commerce worldwide has shown that what seems unthinkable can become reality in a matter of days. Strict restrictions and quarantine orders forced also the consumers preferring to shop in physical stores to switch from offline shopping to the online environment as retail shops and service premises were closed. Given the importance and multidimensionality of place, there is a need for more thorough research into online shopping places and their role in creating customer experience and value.

This chapter focuses on the changing nature of commercial places from physical shopping locations to digital platforms. We provide a conceptual framework for understanding the significance and meaning of digital places to consumers and apply empirical survey data to illustrate the critical aspects on which marketers should focus when designing online places that matter to create value for consumers' everyday lives.

Conceptualisation of place in marketing

Although place is considered a foundation of marketing, the conceptualisation and deep analysis of commercial places in marketing literature are incoherent. What the Marketing Mix synthesises under the name 'place', which could evoke the notion of a static physical location, is a complex distribution channel that represents the flow of goods from the producer to the final consumer to deliver customer value (Kotler *et al.*, 2013). Research fields, such as geography and environmental psychology, have allocated extensive attention to the conceptualisation of place. In one of the most influential works on the topic, Relph (1976) conceptualises place as a multidimensional concept consisting of three main components: location, activities and meanings. He also emphasises the importance of place both functionally and existentially. Tuan (1977) makes a distinction between place and space. According to him, place embodies established values and represents concreteness, stability and belonging. Thus, place may be regarded as safe and stable, whereas space represents openness, change and abstractness and allows freedom and movement. Space includes a social character; it produces social relations and social relations produce space. However, this does not necessarily mean that physical places are always stationary (Cresswell, 2004). For instance, sales booths and pop-up stores are examples of places the location of which is constantly changing. As for online platforms as places, they tend to conform to the definition of space.

To distinguish between the important places in consumers' lives such as home (first place) and work (second place), some authors (Oldenburg, 2001; Rosenbaum and Smallwood, 2013) address commercial places as 'third places'. They highlight the social nature of a location and argue that these places act as informal settings of social life, and they encourage formation of social relationships and networks between different actors in the marketplace. Consumers often seek a social support in commercial places to escape isolation and loneliness that they may experience in first or second places (Rosenbaum and Smallwood, 2013). Moreover, certain commercial places can provide restorative (Korpela *et al.*, 2001) and therapeutic benefits (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2020) and have, therefore, a major impact on consumers' well-being beyond the place.

Meanings of place

Meanings of place are created by the interaction of three components: environment, self and others (Gustafson, 2001). Consumers actively create and shape these meanings based on their personalities, social environments and lifestyle (Thompson and Arsel, 2004). Per Gustafson (2001), places can also hold meanings that are not dependent on the self or others but are rather constituted by a symbolic or historical context of the place. Researchers focusing on commercial places (Brocato, Baker, and Voorhees, 2015; Kyle, Mowen, and Tarrant, 2004) suggest that meanings are co-created and assigned to places when consumers are engaging in various activities and social relationships within a place. Meanings are then subjective and based on personal experiences and feelings with that place.

Relph (1976) indicates that activities that different actors engage in at a certain place are a vital component of that place. Places have long been viewed as the main facility of economic exchange (Bagozzi, 1975) that acts as a repository of potential resources for different market players (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2020). However, in the contemporary marketplace, buyers and sellers are no longer isolated actors that engage in a simple buyer and seller transaction. Digitalisation constantly changes the marketplace in multiple ways

(Hagberg, Sundstrom, and Egels-Zandén, 2016). The roles are blending; boundaries are blurring and the exchange of money, goods, services and information are resulting from complex relationships between various actors in the marketplace. Consumers actively participate in value creation as they engage socially and emotionally with place settings as well as employees and other consumers (Debenedetti, Oppewal, and Arsel, 2013).

Servicescapes and atmospherics

In her seminal work on the physical surroundings of services, Bitner (1992) conceptualises the sites of consumption as servicescapes. She examines how different environmental dimensions, such as space, functions, signs and symbols, or various ambient conditions, such as temperature or noise, influence consumers' internal responses and, therefore, the behaviour that they exhibit. Various elements of the physical place not only influence the behaviour of individual consumers but also affect social interactions and socioeconomic exchanges in servicescapes (Aubert-Gamet and Cova, 1999). Importantly, distinct attributes of the physical environment are experienced by consumers through sensory perceptions (Bitner, 1992). These distinct elements, when combined, forge an overall atmosphere that can attract consumers' attention, arouse affection and trigger or influence consumer behaviour (Turley and Milliman, 2000).

The changing nature of places

Commercial places have undergone profound changes in the past two decades due to digitalisation, which is transforming what consumers perceive as a place as well as how they relate to commercial places. Detaching from brick-and-mortar stores and physical shopping locations in favour of virtual spaces that appear on our screens but do not exist in the tangible world will imply increasing consumer power due to decreasing information asymmetry, increasing transparency and new possibilities for quick, many-to-many social interaction. This dematerialisation has become a significant characteristic of contemporary society; people dissociate from physical possessions, and tangible materiality is replaced by virtual consumption and intangibility (Arcuri and Veludo-de-Oliveira, 2018). Previously, solid relationships with material possession and physical places are becoming unstable, and consumers adhere to values, such as flexibility, adaptability, fluidity, lightness, detachment and speed (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). Online retail stores represent the idea of space that is characterised as intangible and open (Tuan, 1977). Various service platforms offering access-based services and sharing are becoming increasingly popular because they allow consumers to orient themselves towards these values.

The lack of a clear conceptualisation of digital places in the existing literature is striking. Most recent studies on consumers' meanings that focus on commercial places (see e.g. Brocato, Baker, and Voorhees, 2015; Johnson *et al.*, 2015; Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2020) still focus on the physical environments in offline places. Few studies (see e.g. Ballantyne and Nilsson, 2017; Di Masso *et al.*, 2019) have addressed the increasing intangibility of online places and digital platforms. In this chapter, we define online places as virtual shopping locations that possess the characteristics of the space concept (Tuan, 1977). Thus, their physical and social atmospheric elements consisting of exterior, interior, layout, displays and human variables are transformed into abstract, changing digital symbols. However, in line with traditional places, online places act as a repository of available resources (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2020) which facilitate socioeconomic exchange (Aubert-Gamet and Cova,

1999; Bagozzi, 1975) and provide social value. A major distinction between physical and online places lies in the dematerialisation and absence of the physical elements that provide stimuli to all senses. Because of the power of these stimuli, servicescapes can affect customers' beliefs about the place (Bitner, 1992) and trigger various in-store activities as well as purchase decisions (Turley and Milliman, 2000). However, in the online environment, the atmosphere and physical evidence are replaced by virtual cues and symbols that are characterised by certain features, such as movement, change and abstractness. Consumers who shop online from home will have a different experience from those who shop in physical stores and malls and use public or private transport to reach the shopping place.

The ongoing digitalisation transforms the shopping places in multiple ways. Many retailers maintain simultaneously both traditional physical shopping places and online store platforms, resulting in multiple shopping channels of the same retailer available for consumers. Increasingly, the channels exist in consumers' personal mobile devices. Multichannel retailing implies the existence of separate channels, whereas omnichannel concept refers to providing consumers the opportunity to seamlessly move between the channels and thus perform an integrated shopping process while utilising various different channels of a retailer (Hagberg, Sundstrom, and Egels-Zandén, 2016).

This changing experience of place is next analysed by applying the place attachment concept that captures the relationship between a consumer and a place.

Attachment to online places

Sense of place is a focal element in the concept of place, but commercial places are often regarded as lacking in a sense of place due to their inauthenticity (Relph, 1976). For example, shopping malls are constructed by managers to facilitate business, and they are manipulated to serve an artificial public purpose. Some authors even address them as non-places (Aubert-Gamet and Cova, 1999; Lewicka, 2011). Relph (1976) calls this 'placelessness' and connects it to mass culture and mass communication, which are weakening the identity of places. Despite doubt whether commercial places ever trigger consumers' emotional responses or offer possibilities for consumers to establish any kind of relationship with such places (see Lewicka, 2011), several studies indicate that commercial places also have the potential to elicit emotional responses. Accordingly, consumers can establish a strong attachment to commercial places (Brocato, Baker, and Voorhees, 2015) and even act as advocates/ambassadors of these locations (Debenedetti, Oppewal, and Arsel, 2013). However, with their lack of physical evidence and sensory stimuli, we must consider whether virtual places can offer the same experience and relational value as physical places to consumers or if online places and digital platforms are more like non-places. It is still unknown whether virtual places arouse consumers' emotions, influence their behaviour or even trigger strong feelings, such as love or attachment.

The changing environment is challenging how we understand places in the world around us. Consumers can no longer rely on physical evidence and material clues. Instead, they need to find a way to navigate the world of virtual reality with its symbolism and overlapping perspectives (Ballantyne and Nilsson, 2017). Place attachment has been widely researched in the fields of geography (Altman and Low, 1992), environmental psychology (Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001) and tourism (Kyle, Graefe, and Manning, 2005). Several studies have explored this theory in commercial settings as well (Brocato, Baker, and Voorhees, 2015; Debenedetti *et al.*, 2013; Johnson *et al.*, 2015). Di

Masso *et al.* (2019) examine place attachment in increasingly mobile environments, where places become dynamic and fluid instead of fixed and stable. However, to date, no study has examined place attachment in the digital environment.

We draw on an existing conceptualisation of place attachment as a multidimensional bond between consumers and a particular place (Brocato, Baker, and Voorhees, 2015; Johnson *et al.*, 2015). The bond is characterised by a positive attitude and a tendency to remain close to the place (Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001), and it is based on the symbolic meanings that are associated with the place (Altman and Low, 1992). The bond consists of a personal dimension (i.e. *place identity*), a functional dimension (i.e. *place dependence*) and a social dimension that encompasses the various social bonds that consumers establish in the place (Brocato, Baker, and Voorhees, 2015).

Place identity

Place identity represents the personal dimension of the attachment bond. It is an extension of one's self-identity and encompasses feelings, emotions and experiences as well as more abstract beliefs and symbolic connections that an individual has with a particular place (Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff, 1983; Williams *et al.*, 1992). For consumers to identify with a place and establish a strong relationship, such as attachment, their self-identity has to align with the place's identity. Establishing this strong bond makes it part of the individual's concept of self and a way of self-identification (Brocato *et al.*, 2015). Place identity comprises cognitions of the sensory stimuli that we perceive at the place and their accumulation in the form of memories and experiences with the place over time (Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff, 1983). It is clear that physical evidence and different attributes of a place have a significant impact on the formation of place identity in consumers' minds. In the digital environment, sensory stimuli are limited because consumers are perceiving the atmospherics of the place through a digital medium instead of having a rich real-life experience. Nevertheless, new types of online places for shopping and consumption combining both material and imaginary elements have been launched (Hagberg, Sundstrom, and Egels-Zandén, 2016).

Place dependence

Place dependence is an integral part of attachment. It refers to how a place fulfils its function compared to other available places (Williams *et al.*, 1992), and it is considered a functional dimension of the attachment bond (Brocato *et al.*, 2015). In physical settings, consumers are constrained by spatial and time boundaries and limited options. It is not physically possible to visit ten different stores that are located in different parts of a town within a short period. However, the digital environment allows consumers to overcome these boundaries; a few clicks enable the browsing of different stores worldwide. Place dependence is essentially a functional element, and it has usually been the major focus of designing online stores as well as multichannel and omnichannel retail concepts.

Social bonds

Places act as facilitators of social relationships between different marketplace actors (Johnson *et al.*, 2015). These relationships can evolve between consumers and employees as

well as among other consumers (Brocato *et al.*, 2015). The social aspects of a place play a major role in establishing a strong relationship with the place. Moreover, they have positive benefits for consumers' well-being (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2020). Digitalisation transforms the social bonds through incorporating digital technologies in the interactions between retailers and customers as well as that among customers (Hagberg, Sundstrom, and Egels-Zandén, 2016). Face-to-face social interaction is replaced by parasocial relationships (Giles, 2002; Horton and Wohl, 1956). Interaction between different actors is mediated by a digital platform, where users are interacting with either the digital representation of other humans or AI in the form of a chatbot, which is often represented by an anthropomorphised avatar.

Empirical illustration

To illustrate the theoretical discussion and insights, we present findings from an empirical study among four Finnish retail stores. These retailers operate in the design and home décor market; therefore, their stores have atmospheres that will likely arouse consumers' emotions and feelings, which in the long term can develop into a strong relational bond, such as place attachment. Moreover, all four retailers provide a multichannel setting as they operate in both offline and online environments.

Method and data

The data for the study were obtained from a panel of Finnish respondents using an online survey. The respondents were allowed to choose one of the four retailers involved in the study and decide to answer regarding either the retailer's offline or online store. The questionnaire included measures of place dependence, place identity and place bonds measured with 17 items. All items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (I strongly disagree) to 7 (I strongly agree). The data collection resulted in 1,169 valid responses (873 regarding the offline environment and 296 regarding the online environment). In the sample, 45.6% of the respondents were male and 54.4% were female. More than half the respondents (58%) were between 25 and 54 years old. The number of responses for each store reflected the store size; the largest store with the biggest consumer base accounted for 51.8% of our responses and another rather big and popular store in Finland 27%. By contrast, two small designer stores accounted for 12.4% and 8.8% of our responses.

Findings

We performed an independent sample t-test with store type (offline/online) as the independent variable. The dependent variable was place attachment, which was calculated as a mean of the three distinct dimensions: *place identity, place dependence* and *social bonds*. The results in Table 9.1 show no statistically significant differences in the strength of place attachment bond between the offline and online shopping environments. The results imply that consumers can establish an attachment to a place in brick and mortar stores and to a digital space in the online environment. This finding represents an important advancement in the understanding of the transformation of shopping places. Despite drastic changes in the retail environment, retail places can maintain the ability to arouse emotional responses and bonds between commercial places and consumers. The

Table 9.1 Mean comparison for different shopping environments

Factor	Retail environment	Mean	St. Dev.	t -value	p -value
Place Attachment	Offline	3.684	1.040	.131	.896
	Online	3.674	1.066		
Place Identity	Offline	4.034	1.500	.551	.581
	Online	3.979	1.473		
Place Dependence	Offline	4.021	1.483	2.095	.036*
	Online	3.811	1.527		
Social Bonds	Offline	3.271	1.490	−1.379	.168
	Online	3.410	1.538		

*$p < .05$.

accumulation of such responses and experiences over time results in creating a strong emotional bond with the place, regardless of its dematerialised character.

To gain deeper understanding of how the place attachment bond is formed in online environment, we have examined the differences in the distinct dimensions separately. We again performed an independent sample t-test, with independent variable being the type of the store (offline/online) and distinct place attachment dimensions as dependent variables. *Place identity* and *place dependence* were each measured with a scale of three items adapted from Johnson *et al.* (2015); *social bonds* were measured with a five-item scale adapted from Hsieh, Chiu, and Chiang (2005). The dependent variables were obtained by calculating a mean for each dimension. As shown in Table 9.1, the only place attachment dimension that seems to significantly differ in offline and online environments is *place dependence*. *Place dependence* is significantly lower in the online environment than in the offline environment. As discussed earlier, in the physical environment, consumers face spatial and timely constraints that limit how many stores they can visit, while digital platforms and online stores overcome these boundaries. They significantly increase in the number of options that consumers have and enable browsing in multiple stores with only a few mouse clicks.

Unlike the functional dimension of place attachment, the personal and social dimensions do not seem to differ in these two environments. Despite the increased intangibility and the limited number of physical attributes of online stores, consumers can perceive and identify with the identity of a place in the online environment. This finding has important implications for retailers who are operating in online channels. In the traditional physical retail environment, place attachment has shown a positive impact on consumers' loyalty (Johnson *et al.*, 2015), the absence of switching intentions and the spreading of positive WOM (Brocato, Baker, and Voorhees, 2015). It is, therefore, crucial to conceptualise the atmospherics and important attributes of online stores and examine how consumers form their relationship with online place. This allows retailers to construct their online stores to increase consumers' place attachment and loyalty.

Interestingly, consumers seem to perceive the importance of social aspects and interactions that online stores and digital platforms offer equally with physical places. Digitalisation transforms the interface between retailers and consumers and also affects the communication channels and brings new channels such as SM. In the online environment, a form of parasocial relationships replaces face-to-face relationships between consumers and employees as well as between other consumers. Moreover, novel forms of

social relations arise with the emergence of AI technology as consumers interact with an AI-driven chatbot instead of a human being.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we reviewed the theoretical grounds of commercial places and consumers' attachment to these places. By reflecting on the transformation of the retail servicescape from the physicality of brick and mortar stores towards dematerialised intangible digital platforms and online spaces, we have provided an account of the transition from physical places to digital platforms. We connected our theoretical insights with an empirical study that focused on consumers' attachment to offline as well as online places. Our results suggest that consumers establish strong emotional bonds, such as attachment, not only with physical places but also with online places that can only be accessed virtually and do not possess the physical attributes of traditional store atmospherics.

This conceptual paper provides a valid ground for future research on online places and digital platforms. We suggest that future research continues seeking deeper understanding of consumers' relationships to commercial places. The three dimensions of place attachment, that is, place dependence, place identity and social bonds, seem to characterise how consumers form bond with places. Place attachment is one important factor in ensuring customer loyalty and positive word of mouth communication. Future studies should more thoroughly investigate the forms of social relations that are associated with digital platforms and online places, how consumers establish these novel forms of relationship and how they affect consumers' emotions and their attachment to retail stores.

Key lessons for future research

- The pace of technological advancement is rapidly changing the retail landscape. It is, therefore, crucial that researchers reflect on the transformation happening in the commercial places and the various bonds that connect consumers and marketplaces.
- The shopping environment has undergone significant changes in recent years, yet surprisingly few studies have examined the transformation of servicescapes from physical stores to intangible virtual spaces. Future research should examine the consequences of digitalisation on consumers' social and emotional attachment to servicescapes and further impact on shopping behaviours.
- Digital platforms and online stores provide new opportunities for consumers to engage socially with different marketplace actors. Multichannel shoppers use traditional retail to establish relationships with employees as well as other consumers while interacting with both human actors and non-human actors driven by AI in the digital space.

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