

The scalar politics of difference: Researching consumption and marketing outside the west

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between knowledge hierarchies and sociospatial ordering of the world and, in doing so, to problematize the ways we study and understand consumption and marketing outside the West. By sociospatial ordering of the world, I refer to scalar divisions that organize and mobilize hierarchical perceptions of the world. Adopting a view of scale as a way of knowing and apprehending the world, I trace the origins, uses and effects of three scales – Third World, non-Western and emerging markets – that organize and inform research about marketing and consumption outside the West. Each of these scales indicates an imagined distance from an assumed central point and mobilizes visions that order and organize not only places, but knowledge produced in and about these places. I show that these scalar configurations are neither neutral nor transparent designations, but politically charged, sociospatial constructions that privilege certain representations, meanings and identifications over others. In the process, they shape knowledge production, permitting particular forms of difference – absence, plurality and excess – to take shape, circulate and gain legitimacy. I conclude by discussing the possibility of a notion of difference that does not rest on a negative comparison between two entities but is generative, affirmative and non-hierarchical.

Keywords

Decolonial, difference, emerging markets, knowledge hierarchies, non-Western, postcolonial, scale, southern theory, Third World

This paper originates from two observations. First, as marketing scholars, we seem to be hesitant in reflecting on how we conceptualize and study marketing and consumption outside the West. Second, we tend to overlook the hegemonic sociospatial relationships that are implicated in knowledge production and contribute to the ordering of spaces and their theoretical import. Both oversights are surprising given that global interactions and power relationships constitute significant

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domains of inquiry within the field. Scholars emphasize the importance of understanding ‘the context of the context’ (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011) and draw attention to the institutional, historical and intersectional dynamics that structure consumption and marketing (e.g., Firat and Dholakia, 2017; Fitchett et al., 2014; Ger, 2018). Yet, the ways in which power is implicated in knowledge production remain far less investigated (e.g., Faria and Hemais, 2017; Ger et al., 2018; Jafari et al., 2012; Karababa, 2012; Sandıkcı, 2019; Varman, 2019; Varman and Costa, 2013; Varman and Saha, 2009).

The existing research focuses primarily on the problematics of applying to other contexts theoretical frameworks and conceptual categories developed in the West (Ger et al., 2018; Jafari et al., 2012; Karababa, 2012). As critics argue, this approach, which is reflective of an ‘essentialist mindset’ (Karababa, 2012) and ‘ethnocentric myopia’ (Tadajewski, 2008), reifies the differences between the West and the rest (Firat, 2016; Ger et al., 2018; Jafari et al., 2012; Sandıkcı, 2019; Varman and Costa, 2013; Varman and Saha, 2009). Furthermore, scholars highlight the complex, multilayered, (post)colonial interactions that characterize global marketplaces, and criticize the practice of studying non-Western markets through the lens of a Western model of development (e.g., Böhm and Brei, 2008; Dholakia and Atik, 2016; Faria and Hemais, 2017; Hemais and dos Santos, 2020; Tadajewski et al., 2014; Varman, 2019). Initiatives, such as the International Society of Markets and Development, vocalize the need for conducting critical, situated and inclusive research in contexts that remain excluded from the marketing scholarship.

However, despite these critical voices, systematic interrogations of the geopolitics of knowledge production in marketing are yet to emerge. As the editors of this special issue emphasize, ‘marketing remains overwhelmingly Eurocentric in theoretical canon and in what counts as knowledge’ (Kravets and Varman, 2020: 2). Outside the marketing field, there exist compelling critiques of the Anglo-American and Eurocentric dominance in theory and research (e.g., Amin, 2010; Bhambra, 2014; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012a; Connell, 2007; Mignolo, 2009; Santos, 2014; Westwood and Jack, 2007). Challenging the universalism of Western theory and its ‘epistemological ethnocentrism’, scholars call for ‘de-westernizing’, ‘de-centring’, ‘de-linking’ and ‘decolonizing’ the academy, and dismantling the associated knowledge hierarchies (Mignolo, 2009; Santos, 2014; Westwood and Jack, 2007).

Inspired by these debates, my goals in this critical essay are to explore the relationship between knowledge hierarchies and sociospatial ordering of the world and, in doing so, to problematize the ways we study and understand consumption and marketing outside the West. By sociospatial ordering of the world, I refer to scalar divisions, such as global-regional-local or centre-periphery, that organize and mobilize hierarchical perceptions of the world (Marston, 2000; Moore, 2008). While they appear to be fixed and material, scalar configurations do not have ontological existence; rather, they are ‘representational tropes’ or ‘discursive frames’ that enable particular ways of knowing and apprehending the world (Jones, 1998; Kaiser and Nikiforova, 2008). Acknowledging that knowing is always contextual and (re)constituted through language and social practice, attention to the scalar divisions that inform research helps problematize the hegemonic structures that produce and maintain the taken-for-granted conceptualizations of space (Berg, 2004; Spivak, 1988).

I pursue these goals through a narrative review of the research on consumption and marketing outside the West. The narrative review approach entails searching, mapping and evaluating the pivotal sources in an area of literature to trace its development and chronology (Baumeister and Leary, 1997). Such selective engagement with the literature allows the reviewer to identify, explore and critique assumptions that might have remained obscure over the years. I began the review process by searching the Web of Science, Scopus and Google Scholar databases to identify pivotal articles published in leading marketing journals and edited collections since the 1960s. Next, I

narratively assessed the articles to understand how marketing scholars characterize the research contexts they study. This process identified three frequently used designations: *Third World* (and its various incarnations, such as underdeveloped, less developed and developing), *non-Western* and *emerging markets*.

Each of these scales indicates an imagined distance from an assumed central point and mobilizes visions that order and organize not only places, but knowledge produced in and about these places. However, as these terms populate the marketing scholarship rather unproblematically, their effects on knowledge production remain mostly overlooked. By mapping out the origins, uses and effects of these scales, I discuss how they structure the ways consumption and marketing outside the West are understood and studied. In doing so, I draw attention to the scalar politics through which particular forms of difference gain ascendancy and legitimacy.

In the remaining pages, I first offer a brief overview of the critical approaches to scales and scalar politics and discuss the implications of scalar analysis for marketing. The following sections offer critical readings of the pivotal studies on Third World, non-Western and emerging markets respectively, and discuss how assumptions and meanings constituted through these scales culminate in distinct conceptualizations of difference, and shape knowledge production in marketing. I conclude by discussing the possibility of moving away from a notion of difference that rests on a negative comparison between two entities, to one that is generative, affirmative and non-hierarchical.

Scaling places, scaling knowledge

In the most elementary sense, scale refers to a level of representation (i.e., local, regional, global) used to understand ‘the processes that shape and constitute social practices at different levels’ (Marston, 2000: 220). Critical research in this area conceptualizes scales as socially constructed, politically contested and relational configurations and explore why and how particular scales form, perform and transform (e.g., Brenner, 2001; Marston, 2000; Smith, 1993). This literature offers three key insights.

First, rather than pre-given entities, scales are products of wider social, political, economic, and cultural relationships and power dynamics (Brenner, 2001; Kaiser and Nikiforova, 2008; MacKinnon, 2010; Marston, 2000). Configured through heterogenous, conflictual and contested processes (Swyngedouw, 1997), scales embody and express the tensions between structural forces and the practices of actors (MacKinnon, 2010; Marston, 2000). As social constructions, ‘scales are never fixed, but are perpetually redefined, contested and restructured in terms of their extent, content, relative importance and interrelations’ (Swyngedouw, 1997: 141).

Second, deconstruction and reconstruction of scales are implicated in the struggles of control and empowerment (Brenner, 2001; Smith, 1993; Swyngedouw, 1997). Scalar politics, the processes through which scales are employed, reorganized and transformed, help mobilize sociospatial identifications, engagements and contestations (Kaiser and Nikiforova, 2008; MacKinnon, 2010). Through a variety of practices, actors create, recreate and control specific scalar arrangements to advance their interests and gain recognition and advantage. New scalar arrangements strengthen the power of some while disempowering others.

Third, despite their dynamic presence, scales misleadingly appear as fixed. Once constructed, they act as if material entities, or ‘platforms’ for the unfolding of social relations (Moore, 2008). Scalar fixes, the stabilization of hierarchical power relations among scales, contribute to the organization of social, political, economic and cultural practices according to the established hierarchies (Brenner, 2001; MacKinnon, 2010). As particular scalar configurations solidify in

consciousness and practice, they shape what we ‘know’ about the world by enabling or constraining certain ways of seeing, thinking and acting (Berg, 2004; Jones, 1998; Moore, 2008).

Scalar divisions structure research and theorization in marketing. Scholars identify and analyse consumption and marketing practices at different scales (i.e., global consumer culture) and discuss similarities and differences across scales (i.e., cross-cultural comparisons). However, despite their essential presence, scales and their role in knowledge production remain mostly unaccounted for. In a rare attempt, Chelekis and Figueiredo (2015) draw attention to the importance of analytical scales in shaping how we understand marketing phenomena and argue that ‘manipulating the scale of analysis can reveal certain details and characteristics while obscuring others’ (p. 323). For example, using region as an analytical scale allows going beyond the local situatedness of consumption practices and values to reveal similarities and differences in consumer cultures spanning large areas, without collapsing the observed experiences to a singular global consumer culture (ibid).

I argue that the potential of scalar analysis lies more in its capacity to problematize the very scalar divisions that marketing scholars work with, however, nuanced they might become, and to expose the ways that scaling of markets contributes to the scaling of marketing knowledge. Pursuing such potential requires asking how people, places, practices and social relationships are mapped into particular scalar configurations, such as the Third World, and how such representations are deployed in studying and writing about marketing and consumption outside the West. It also brings attention to the sociospatial and political dynamics through which new scales, such as emerging markets, are created and shape existing knowledge hierarchies. Lastly, a scalar perspective is conducive to understanding how scalar configurations inform thinking about difference in the context of marketing and consumption outside the West. If scaling processes are key to spatial differentiation and ordering, then attention to scalar dynamics helps unpack distinct conceptualizations of difference and their implications for knowledge production. Next, I explore these questions through a critical discussion of the ways Third World, non-Western and emerging markets organize the marketing scholarship.

Third world and difference in absence

The term Third World has emerged from the rhetoric of cold war as a new geographical imagination to account for countries that fall outside of capitalist and communist camps (Tomlinson, 2003). In this hierarchical configuration, Third World became a trope for underdevelopment, poverty, and dependency. The scaling of the world along lines of sociopolitical and economic development was instrumental in establishing American hegemonic power after the second World War and positioning the USA as the leader and protector of the free world (Tadajewski et al., 2014).

The blueprints of development came from modernization theory, which propagated adoption of Western capitalist values and practices as key to transitioning from a traditional to a modern society (Rostow, 1960). Through the discourses of development, industrialization and modernization, a large group of countries that varied significantly in their historical experiences, cultural heritage and sociopolitical dynamics, was assembled as the Third World. The narrative of modernization provided the basis for locating First World countries at the modern end of the continuum while the Third World was yet to develop (Ferguson, 2005).

The term Third World – and its affiliates, underdeveloped, less developed, developing and industrializing countries – entered the marketing lexicon in the late 1950s. From the outset, the view of the Third World as a space of poverty and deficiency framed research. Consistent with the assumed role of marketing as an important agent of modernization (Rostow, 1965), scholars focused on generating insights that would help instil marketing know-how and practice in Third World countries and contribute to their development. By the late 1980s, a rich literature on marketing in the

Third World had emerged (e.g., Çavuşgil and Yavaş, 1984; Dholakia and Sherry, 1987; Drucker, 1958; Joy and Ross, 1989; Kaynak and Hudanah, 1987; Şamlı and Kaynak, 1984). Three key areas of inquiry spanned this body of work: the nature of the marketing environment of the Third World; impediments to the adoption of American/Western marketing concepts and techniques in the Third World; and the impact of marketing practices on the economic and sociocultural dynamics of the Third World.

In much of the academic writing of the time, the Third World was characterized by underdeveloped consumption, production, human resources and technology (Bartels, 1976; Dholakia, 1981; Şamlı and Kaynak, 1984). The lack of managerial know-how, inefficient distribution systems, low trade margins and large number of small suppliers were cited as evidence for the nonexistence of (western) marketing in the Third World (Drucker, 1958; Kaynak and Hudanah, 1987). Further, researchers reported that, in less developed countries, marketing was mostly seen as a 'parasitic' activity (Kaynak and Hudanah, 1987; Van Wood and Vitell, 1986).

Against this background, marketing scholars pushed to establish the positive effects of marketing on development. It was believed that, beyond creating efficient systems of distribution and improving product variety and quality, marketing would cultivate modern consumption environments in developing countries. In particular, the expansion of multinational corporations and the international transfer of technology would facilitate formation of a First-World-style consumer culture in the Third World (Belk, 1988; Darley and Johnson, 1993; Joy and Wallendorf, 1996; Kaynak, 1985). The scholarly consensus was that marketing was a constructive force in modernizing the Third World (Bartels, 1976; Drucker, 1958; Kaynak and Hudanah, 1987; Rao, 1976).

Overall, the Third World, configured through the lens of development, has generated an understanding that is defined by absence – absence of marketing institutions, managerial know-how and consumption orientation and capabilities (Varman and Costa, 2013). Simply put, since modernity was (as yet) absent in the Third World, so were its pillars, marketing and consumer culture. Hence, research attention amounted to measuring the extent of absence in the Third World against a Euro-American ideal. Framing Third World difference in terms of lack helped legitimize the epistemological universality of Western marketing knowledge and establish its hegemonic position from the very beginning. If marketing and consumption were absent in the Third World, then it followed that theories and conceptual categories developed in the West were the only tools available for researchers to study market-related phenomena observed in these contexts. They could be used unproblematically to describe, explain and predict marketing and consumption in the Third World.

The ordering of countries based on their level of development has continued to inform marketing scholarship. For example, the country-of-origin theorization rests on the assumption that country image shapes product quality perceptions, and Third World countries that lag behind in development also lag behind in product quality and marketing prowess (Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran, 2000). Similarly, cross-cultural studies of consumption and marketing based on Hofstede's model of cultural dimensions divide the world into Western modern and Eastern traditional countries. Such essentialist categorizations guide researchers in explaining and predicting differences in market phenomena such as advertising appeals, innovation, service performance, brand imagery and product diffusion (e.g., Ganesh et al., 1997; Lynn et al., 1993). The view of the developed West and the backward Third World also shapes much of the global branding literature. Research suggests that consumers in developing countries embrace brands from the West 'as a passport to global citizenship' (Steenkamp et al., 2003; Strizhakova et al., 2011: 342). Moreover, the entry of Western brands into developing country markets changes the nature of the local competition and helps local companies build up their own successful brands (Anholt, 2003; Khanna and Palepu, 2004).

Overall, the discourse of development constructs and legitimizes not only the economic superiority of the First World but also the epistemological hegemony of Euro-American marketing

knowledge. Approaching Third World marketing and consumption environments in terms of absence and inferiority reinforces the view of the West as the source of knowledge, and the Third World as a supplier of 'raw data' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012a). Emanating from this hierarchical perspective is a persistent indifference toward the existence of different ways of knowing the world (Mignolo, 2018) and an unreflexive commitment to the belief in the universality of Western marketing knowledge.

Non-Western and difference in plurality

Since the late 1980s, the universal telos of Western modernity has come under attack on several intellectual fronts. Theories of globalization challenged the efficacy of linear development models and highlighted differentiated, multiple modernities (e.g., Appadurai, 1990; Pieterse, 1995). Postdevelopment theory critiqued the idea of bringing development to the Third World and took issue with the developed/underdeveloped distinction (e.g., Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1990). Postcolonial approaches further disputed the Eurocentric world view that depicts the West as modern and progressive, and the rest of the world as backward and primitive (e.g., Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1978). Exposing the complicity between modern capitalist regimes and modern 'universal' knowledge, postcolonial thinkers sought to contest and provincialize the discourse of Western modernity and gave voice to previously marginalized non-Western historical experiences (e.g., Chakrabarty, 2000; Chatterjee, 1997).

These critical perspectives have found support within the marketing field, and researchers have begun to challenge the assumption of a uniform and singular trajectory of modernity structuring the marketing and consumption environments of the developing world. In contrast to the homogeneity implied in the discourse of development, non-Western, as an alternative scalar configuration, has privileged plurality and hybridity. Arnould's (1989) analysis of the processes of innovation diffusion among the Hausa in the Republic of Niger, and Ger and Belk's studies on globalization of consumer culture (Ger, 1997; Ger and Belk, 1996) provided early evidence that consumer behaviour in non-Western contexts cannot simply be considered as a mere imitation of the Western model. Ger and Belk (1996) made a strong case against the view of a homogenized, Western consumer culture and argued that, through the process of creolization, consumers imbue global products and consumption practices with new, localized meanings.

Further research into non-Western contexts has exposed the diverse ways that local and global are synthesized and articulated in and through consumption (e.g., Dong and Tian, 2009; Eckhardt and Mahi, 2012; Jafari and Goulding, 2008; Karababa and Ger, 2011; Sandıkçı and Ger, 2002, 2010; Üstüner and Holt, 2007, 2010; Varman and Vikas, 2007; Varman and Belk, 2008, 2012; Yazicioğlu and Fırat, 2007). Studies conducted in contexts such as Turkey, India and China, revealed the tensions and interactions between local and global forces and illustrated the ways consumers combine local and global resources while constructing their identities.

The acknowledgement of multiple paths to modernity has also rendered problematic the assumption that consumer culture originated in the West and has only recently spread to the rest (Ger et al., 2018). Historical analyses of non-Western contexts identified alternative historical trajectories of consumer cultures (e.g., Karababa, 2012; Karababa and Ger, 2011; Zhao and Belk, 2008). For example, Zhao and Belk's (2008) work on China revealed striking similarities between the commercial forces shaping Shanghai in the 1930s and the commercialism found in China today. Work on the Ottoman Empire (Karababa, 2012; Karababa and Ger, 2011) traced the formation of a consumer subject back to the 16th century and showed that hybrid consumption practices had been present since the early modern period.

Overall, in these streams of research, the scale ‘non-Western’ functions as a trope to discuss ‘the existence of multiple, competing, and contested cultures’ (Yazicioğlu and Fırat, 2007: 115) and the dynamic interplay between local and global, modern and traditional. In contrast to the absence that defines Third World, plurality and hybridity structure conceptualizations of the non-Western. The distinction between the West and the non-West stems not from their varied positions on the ladder of development, but the differentiated forms of modernities and diverse syntheses of local and global that are in operation.

The emphasis on plurality and hybridity provides a relevant critique of the essentialist views of culture and modernity implicit in the discourse of development. However, the shift from the sequential stages of modernization to alternative modernities also raises epistemological problems. While the notion of multiple modernities problematizes binaries of ‘civilized’ and ‘non-civilized’ and enables analyses of fusions and creative inventions, it continues to consider Western modernity as ‘original’ modernity which others adapt, localize and hybridize (Bhambra, 2007, 2010; Escobar, 2004; Ferguson, 2005). These culturally different ways of being modern ‘simply provide local colour’ to the European experience (Bhambra, 2007: 878).

In a similar vein, research on marketing and consumption in non-Western contexts relies on conceptualizations of market, marketing, and consumer subjectivity that are derivative of Western modernity, and seeks to understand the additions and particularities that the non-West brings to the ideal type. Reflecting this orientation, researchers stress the importance of conducting contextually and historically grounded research and advocate the use of empirical approaches that are better suited to identifying the interconnected flows and creative appropriations (e.g., Belk et al., 2003; Cayla and Arnould, 2008; Douglas and Craig, 2011; Jafari et al., 2012; Karababa, 2012; Venkatesh, 1995).

Ethnoconsumerism proposed by Venkatesh (1995), for instance, calls for the study of non-Western contexts by using the conceptual categories originating in that context. Ethnoconsumerist research commences with the basic categories of a given culture and by recounting the native’s point of view, which is followed by linking these to the historical, sociocultural and institutional dynamics of that culture and to the broader theoretical frameworks. Such situated analysis can generate new concepts that enrich existing theorizations. For instance, adding the dominated consumer acculturation model to consumer acculturation theory (Üstüner and Holt, 2010) and guanxi to models of relationship marketing (Gu et al., 2008) and consumer gift-giving (Joy, 2001), illustrate the potential of knowledge derived from non-Western contexts for advancing the marketing theory. However, by continuing to maintain a general framework of marketing and consumption within which particularities are located – associating particularities with the non-Western, and the general framework with Euro-American experiences – such analyses reproduce rather than call into question knowledge hierarchies that structure the marketing scholarship.

Overall, non-Western as a trope for plurality and hybridity, enables the framing and studying of difference between the West and the non-West in terms of variations rather than absence. However, by not allowing difference to make a difference to the modes of thinking and knowing that shape understanding, explaining and theorizing, engagement with the non-West often takes the form of ‘the rather liberal gesture of a pluralisation of “others”’ (Bhambra, 2007; Savransky, 2017: 12). While critical approaches informed by theories of globalization, postcolonialism, postmodernism and poststructuralism open up an intellectual space to interrogate the hierarchies of knowledge production in marketing, this potential remains mostly unrealized in the case of studies of the non-Western. If we accept that colonial oppression is exerted, ‘above all, over the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification over resources, patterns, and instruments of formalized and objectivised expression, intellectual or visual’ (Quijano, 2007: 169), then context-specific understandings of plurality,

hybridity, mimicry, and resistance cannot challenge the epistemological superiority of the West without participating in its imaginations of marketing and consumption. Such understandings reveal the localized historical and contemporary dynamics of non-Western consumptionscapes, but as they continue to rely on Eurocentric conceptualizations of subjectivity, community, person-object relationships and cosmology they ultimately reproduce the prevailing Western accounts of consumption and marketing.

Emerging markets and difference in excess

The term ‘emerging markets’ speaks of new ways of understanding and representing the familiar spaces of the world outside the West. Through the signifier ‘emerging’, underdeveloped countries are reinscribed into the logic of neoliberal global capitalism as markets of potentiality and availability (Kaur, 2018; Sidaway and Pryke, 2000). The genealogy of emerging markets goes back to international financial circles of the 1980s. In 1981, the International Finance Corporation, a World Bank subsidiary, initiated Third-World Equity Fund to promote investment in developing countries (Van Agtmael, 2007). However, with the lingering reputation of the Third World as unstable and risky markets, the project failed to attract investment. It became apparent to fund managers that a new taxonomy that would make the Third World more attractive was required. Thus, emerging markets, ‘a term that sounded more positive and invigorating’ (Van Agtmael, 2007: 5) was created.

Emerging markets, as an alternative scale to conceive of the developing world, reflects a powerful process of economic othering and ordering (Lee, 2003). The term suggests the designated countries’ investability and inclusion in the world of global capital, while at the same time marking their exclusion from the world of ‘mature’ markets. According to its critics, the rediscovery of the Third World as emerging markets is nothing more than ‘a means of repositioning postcolonial countries firmly back in relations of extractive dependency with the financial centres of the old imperial core’ (Tilley, 2018: 2). The word ‘emerging’ itself suggests an intermediary state, a precious yet precarious status that only some countries can achieve (Kaur, 2018; Sidaway and Pryke, 2000). Others get stuck in an indeterminate condition of ‘pre-emerging’.

Emerging markets have become the focus of sustained research, initially in finance and economics, and then in other domains of business (Ferreira et al., 2020). Acknowledging that emerging markets are the growth engines of the world economy, marketing scholarship has sought to understand the implications of their untapped potential (e.g., Arnold and Quelch, 1998; Bang et al., 2016; Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006; Çavuşgil, 1997; Dawar and Chattopadhyay, 2002; Sheth, 2011). A key concern has been identifying the differences between emerging and mature markets in relation to the key marketing and consumption variables. The influential essays of Burgess and Steenkamp (2006) and Sheth (2011) have provided the frameworks through which emerging markets are commonly approached by marketing scholars.

Burgess and Steenkamp (2006) discuss three key features that differentiate emerging markets from developed economies. First, rapid economic and political changes render the socioeconomic systems of emerging markets dynamic and diverse. Second, traditions, group identifications, and participation in shared ways of life characterize their cultural environments. Third, flaws in the enforcement of rule of law and stakeholder influence on corporate governance foster a regulatory system plagued by corruption. Sheth (2011) identifies five dimensions that distinguish emerging markets – market heterogeneity, sociopolitical governance, unbranded competition, chronic shortage of resources and inadequate infrastructure. Lower purchasing power and wide income disparities, the lack of availability and affordability of branded products, and reliance on unbranded products create inefficient competitive environments. Governments, religious institutions and local

communities influence business operations, generating market imperfections. The lack of roads and storage facilities makes consumers harder to reach.

Evident in the discussions of emerging markets are colonial, orientalist and reductionist undertones. However, there is also something unusual about these prevailing depictions. Unlike the grim absence that defines the Third World, and the potent plurality associated with non-Western contexts, emerging markets invoke images of unruly excess – excess of consumers, goods, resources, desires and energy amid spectres of scarcity and volatility. The surfeit appears in many forms: the attractiveness of large middle-classes; the growing desire for a good life; the creative and entrepreneurial spirit of youthful populations; rapid economic growth and change and the vast availability of raw material and cheap labour. The fact that emerging markets lag behind mature economies in marketing and consumption make their excess potential so valuable. The shortages, inefficiencies, instabilities and institutional voids that structure emerging markets are precisely what make them so attractive.

However, such unruly excess also renders emerging markets challenging places in which to conduct research and produce marketing knowledge. For example, [Nailer et al. \(2015\)](#) argue that because emerging economies change faster than mature economies, ‘in an emerging economy, over any given period of time, the phenomena the researcher sets out to measure will have shifted more substantially than will the same phenomena if measured in a developed economy’ (p. 861). [Burgess and Steenkamp \(2006\)](#) note that emerging markets ‘present significant socioeconomic, demographic, cultural, and regulative departures from the assumptions of theories developed in the Western world and challenge our conventional understanding of constructs and their relations’ (p. 338). [Sheth \(2011\)](#) suggests that emerging markets provide abundant new learning and research opportunities, but studying them requires a re-evaluation of traditional marketing assumptions.

The consensus among researchers seems to be that emerging markets are ‘intriguing’ and ‘natural’ laboratories – not only to assess the generalizability of marketing theories, but also to devise new theories specifically formulated for emerging markets (e.g., [Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006](#); [Çavuşgil, 2021](#); [Sheth, 2011](#)). As Burgess and Steenkamp note, using constructs originally developed in mature economies ‘makes perfect sense as there is no reason to assume that these constructs are not applicable to EM [emerging market] settings’ (2006: 340). In addition, emerging markets offer a ‘fertile ground’ to develop new constructs and theoretical models; however, whether such ‘indigenous’ knowledge can be employed in other emerging markets and ‘perhaps even’ in mature economies remains unknown ([Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006](#): 340). For example, research on branding identifies the strategic paths that are uniquely available to emerging-market companies when entering foreign markets ([Kumar and Steenkamp, 2013](#)). Similarly, studies suggest that the unique political economic, socio-cultural conditions and historical experiences that characterize emerging markets culminate in distinctive class dynamics ([Kravets and Sandıkcı, 2014](#)).

Overall, the framing of emerging markets through the lens of excess enables going beyond a reductionist view that conceptualizes consumption and marketing environments outside the West in terms of absence. Similarly, it opens up a theoretical space through which one can potentially engage with emerging markets not merely as exotic variations and local flavours, but spaces for generation of marketing knowledge *sui generis*. However, to date, this potential remains mostly unrealized. Knowledge produced about emerging markets continues to maintain the hegemonic position of Euro-American theories of marketing. Experiences, concepts and frameworks originating from emerging markets either constitute boundary conditions of existing theories or are confined to the status of ‘practical theories’ ([Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012a](#)), limited in their scope and generalizability.

However, the untapped potential of emerging markets for knowledge production in marketing may lie in deploying their excess as a way to make sense of the experiences and implications of neoliberal global modernity – a modernity that encompasses both the South and the North (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012a; Rosa, 2014). According to John Comaroff, the point about theorizing from the South – from India, Brazil or Africa – is not ‘because “better” theory comes from there, but because the South experiences global forces in a particularly edgy way’ (quoted in Kaur, 2018: 368). Emerging markets, which are central to production and value creation in the contemporary world, foreshadow the ways in which the global political economy is being reshaped. As such, they can provide an ‘ex-centric’ perspective on the workings of the world at large, enabling a challenge to mainstream theory-building while surpassing all manner of binaries and hierarchies.

De-scaling difference

This essay has been concerned with problematizing the ways we think of spaces outside the West by bringing attention to the essential yet often invisible relation between the sociospatial ordering of the world and the hierarchies of knowledge production. Adopting a view of scale as a way of knowing and apprehending the world (Jones, 1998), I have traced the origins, uses, and effects of three scales that organize and inform research about marketing and consumption outside the West. As the analysis shows, terms such as ‘Third World’, ‘non-Western’ or ‘emerging markets’ are neither neutral nor transparent designations, but politically charged, sociospatial constructions that privilege certain representations, meanings, and identifications over others. In the process, they shape knowledge production, permitting particular forms of difference to take shape, circulate and gain legitimacy. The notions of absence, plurality and excess that implicitly or explicitly structure marketing scholarship about the non-West do not simply construct differences. Rather, they ultimately confirm the position of Euro-American theories, concepts and approaches as universal, hegemonic ways of knowing and understanding consumption and marketing. Hence, critical interrogations of the scales that gain precedence in scholarly writing and the ways scalar politics operate in research, help unpack how the ordering of markets, consumers, and marketing and consumption practices are intertwined with the geopolitics of knowledge production.

It is true that scales, no matter how nuanced, inevitably contribute to a hierarchical understanding of the world and reify unequal power dynamics and identity relations (Marston et al., 2005). However, it is precisely this performative potential of scalar thinking that enables analysis of how differences are conceptualized and studied. As it appears, thinking about consumption and marketing outside the West is essentially thinking about difference. Studies framed through the lenses of Third World, non-Western, and emerging markets almost invariably manifest difference in negative terms, focusing on how marketing and consumption spaces outside the West contradict those of the West.

The problem with a view of difference as contradiction is that it tends to maintain existing hegemonic sociospatial orderings and undermine modes of knowing that fall outside the Euro-American framework. In some instances, scholars take a more contextually reflexive approach and attend to the historical, institutional and sociocultural dynamics of the research setting (e.g., Arnould, 1989; Dong and Tian, 2009; Kravets and Sandıkçı, 2014; Kuruoğlu and Ger, 2015; Sandıkçı and Ger, 2010; Türe and Ger, 2016; Üstüner and Holt, 2007, 2010; Varman and Belk, 2008; Varman and Vikas, 2007). Even so, their focus tends to be more on providing situated appropriations or extensions of Western theories and concepts than a much deeper questioning of the assumptions of difference and ways of knowing. Beyond a commitment to reflexivity, diversity, and contextualized understandings, dismantling knowledge hierarchies calls for ‘epistemic disobedience’ (Mignolo, 2009) – interest in de-linking from Eurocentrism and openness to cosmological,

ontological and epistemological multiplicities and entanglements in knowledge production. As [Bhambra \(2007\)](#) remarks, “the simple pluralization of ‘other’ voices in fields previously dominated by particular voices can never be enough. The emergence of these new voices must call into question the structures of knowledge that had previously occluded such voices” (p. 879).

Furthermore, even when it is acknowledged that ‘all knowledge production is embodied and conditioned by the researcher’s situatedness’ ([Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992](#); [Reiter, 2018](#): 3), studies often fail to account for how epistemic and contextual assumptions and choices are embedded in and reproduce the hegemonic understandings of marketing and consumption. Researchers seek to offer a more situated, critical representation of a phenomenon, but forget to diffract its perception against any form of authority and interrogate ‘how different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how these exclusions matter’ ([Barad, 2007](#): 30). The essence of decolonizing knowledge is to break the illusion of the universality of Western epistemology, and highlight the provincial location of all theory ([Chakrabarty, 2000](#); [Mignolo, 2009](#)). Theorizing from the South, therefore, is neither about replacing one hegemon with another, nor producing theories of people of the south or ‘about’ the south ([Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012b](#)). Rather, as a ‘concept-metaphor’, it stands for the wider analytical project of disrupting current knowledge-power relations ([Connell, 2007](#)) as well as mobilizing new ways of thinking, learning and doing ([Jazeel and McFarlane, 2010](#)).

Toward this end, as marketing scholars, we can begin by questioning the ways in which we think about difference, and how our assumptions of difference are implicated in the scalar politics of knowledge production. Such an attempt requires going beyond the existing focus on difference *between* and its exclusionary effects, and accommodating a view of difference as generative and affirmative. In his idea of ‘difference-in-itself’, [Deleuze \(1994\)](#) proposes a notion of difference that does not presuppose identities and is internal to all things. Difference-in-itself, an irreducible, indeterminate and ontological difference, becomes subordinated in representation to a negative concept of difference between (‘a’ is not ‘b’). This subordination occurs through what [Deleuze \(1994\)](#) calls the ‘four shackles of mediation’ (p. 29): identity, opposition, analogy and resemblance. That is, ‘difference becomes an object of representation always in relation to a conceived identity, a judged analogy, and imagined opposition or a perceived similitude’ (p. 138). As difference-in-itself becomes subordinated to representation and representation is that which is given an empirical reality, a Deleuzian notion of difference calls for better understanding how the given becomes given.

The prevailing conceptualizations of marketing and consumption spaces outside the West reflect the totalizing and often violent work of representation that defines these spaces in terms of lack, variation and surplus in comparison to the West, but never in terms of their ontological differences. Differences in absence, plurality and excess subjugate productive and affirmative differences to the requirements of measured resemblance to, and degrees of deviance from a Western ideal. In contrast, difference-in-itself rearticulates difference as multiplicities that cannot be grouped or organized in relation to universals ([Cockayne et al. \(2017\)](#)). Following Deleuze, if we recognise life as a multiplicity of micro-differences that cannot be subordinated to identity, then we can start tracing connections and ‘connected histories’ that are not premised upon comparisons to universal narratives and reduced to binary modes of thinking.

However, tracing connections and paying attention to difference-in-itself should not be considered as simply de-emphasizing representation and the power it exerts in structuring experience and understanding. Rather, while holding in mind the power effects of difference, the aim is to consider ‘an account of representation as a particular ‘image of thought’ while maintaining that there may be other worlds available and possible, that difference need not always be tied to representation’ ([Cockayne et al., 2017](#): 593). Such recognition opens up possibilities for different knowledges and the ‘thinkability’ of their being counted as knowledge ([Madhok, 2020](#)).

Equally, the emphasis on difference-in-itself and epistemic diversity should not be interpreted as a call for cultural relativism. Decolonial critique encourages to engage with multiple epistemological, cosmological and ontological forms and traditions without ‘either becoming a colony of the Northern mainstream or retreating into a Southern “indigenous” enclave’ (Hamann et al., 2020: 2). Acknowledging multiplicities and connections is neither about rejecting universal knowledge as such, nor valorising localized knowledge. Rather, it is about the ability to understand the world in dialogue with multiple different worldviews. If we accept that all existence consists of difference (Deleuze, 1994), then we need to rethink difference and imagine new strategies for studying differences that resist hierarchization. This is not easily achievable, but it is inevitable.

As scholars across disciplines highlight, confronting Euro-American dominance in theory and research is a challenging task (e.g., Bhambra, 2014; Connell, 2007; Westwood and Jack, 2007). The bias in journal rankings, the unquestioned status of English as the scholarly language, the discouragement of theoretical and methodological pluralism, to name a few, are powerful barriers against the de-hierarchization of knowledge production. Moreover, it is not just concepts, theories, and approaches that are Eurocentric, ‘but also the world’s political economic arrangements, and social and cultural systems’ (Alatas, 2021: 14). Challenging Eurocentrism in knowledge is as much challenging the dominance of Eurocentricity in the modern world itself. Yet, this should not preclude us from making an attempt; doing nothing is not an ethico-political option. As Santos (2018) comments, epistemologies of the South are anchored in the experiences of those who ‘have systematically suffered injustice, oppression, and destruction caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy’ (p. 1) and manifest a will to disrupt the current order of power, both material and epistemological.

In comparison to adjacent fields of business, such as Management and Organization Studies (e.g., Boussebaa and Tienari, 2019; Hamann et al., 2020; Özkazanç-Pan, 2008; Seremani and Clegg, 2016), marketing has been slow to take a decolonial turn. Nevertheless, the proliferation of calls to decolonize business schools (Banerjee et al., 2020) suggest that similar discussions are likely to become more prominent within the marketing discipline. This special issue represents an important step in initiating debate about knowledge hierarchies. As discussed, a few critical voices have called attention to the problems involved in studying consumption and marketing outside the West, but their voices have been rather marginalized. Hence, it is essential to raise awareness about the geopolitics of knowledge production, and expose the ways in which the Eurocentric episteme (re) produces and privileges particular forms of difference. Only by acknowledging that marketing scholarship has, to a large extent, subscribed to an idea of negative difference, can we begin formulating a more affirmative and generative notion of difference.

A non-hierarchical approach to difference accepts interconnections as the key to existence. It privileges a relational ontology that seeks to build connections and expose existing connections that have been collectively overlooked and erased. By shifting our attention from separational and totalizing categories to horizontal connections and conversations, we can start reshaping marketing in ways that allow new epistemologies and methodologies to flourish. For example, rather than focusing on individual theorists and their theoretical lenses, we can put their ideas in dialogue with other perspectives that remain silenced. This requires gaining literacy in works that exist outside the Euro-American canon, and building connections between theorists, theories and concepts that come from very different epistemic locations. This is a laborious but essential task that we need to collectively undertake both in research and teaching.

Embracing ‘multi-epistemic literacy’ (Kuokkanen, 2011) and relational ontologies also facilitates the broadening of methodological approaches, and pursuing alternative forms of inquiry that foster a non-hierarchical dialogue between different ways and traditions of being and knowing. Research

conducted with a decolonial perspective on topics as diverse as street food (Palat Narayanan, 2021), digital technologies (Newell and Pype, 2021), embodiment (Zaragocin and Caretta, 2021) and wilderness (Vannini and Vannini, 2019) demonstrate various ways of interacting with multiple worlds, and new forms of collaboration that are geared toward studying multiplicities and connections. They also illustrate how knowledge production can be decolonized in practical terms, and guide us toward theorizing not just about the South, but theorizing with and from the South.

Scalar configurations, along with the understandings and orientations that they valorise, are instrumental to producing difference as a problem and maintaining the dominant position of the West as the source of universal knowledge. However, engaging with them critically also urges to study marketing and consumption relationally, without treating alternative forms of being and knowing in terms of better or worse. Keeping in mind that epistemic justice is linked with social justice (Santos, 2018), the question is whether we are ready to embrace marketing theory that does not claim universality from a Euro-American perspective and exclude the experiences, knowledges and thoughts of many.

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