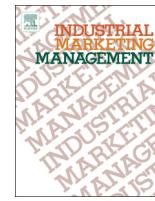




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Economic geography and industrial marketing views on trade shows: Collective marketing and knowledge circulation

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we critically review literature on trade shows developed in industrial marketing (IM) and economic geography (EG), aiming to contribute to the ongoing conversation between these disciplines and showing that they can learn from each other. In IM, trade shows are conceived as promotional instruments, whereas in EG these events are seen as temporary clusters through which firms can escape the liabilities of embeddedness and interact with, and learn from, distant actors. EG literature has integrated insights from IM that have provided a means to go beyond earlier formulations that downplayed market-based learning processes at these events. IM has in fact far under-theorized space and conceived exhibitors as individual agents, neglecting the fact that many of these events are collective marketing platforms that industry agglomerations or geographical clusters can use to affirm their presence in international markets. Based on our analysis, we propose research directions that can benefit individual exhibitors as well as geographically-based business networks. The analysis addresses the boundaries and limitations of disciplinary analyses and strongly suggests transdisciplinary encounters and engagements in IM and EG research.

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1. Introduction

Trade shows are a well-established component of industrial marketers' promotional mix. Despite ongoing debates about the negative impact that the digitalization of promotional activities has had on the trade show industry, these events remain important promotional tools for firms operating in industrial markets (see Goltetto & Rinallo, 2012, for an overview). Research in the field of industrial marketing (IM) has mostly focused on how individual firms, preoccupied with the 'exorbitant costs of exhibiting,' might select the best events, manage their participation effectively, and maximize returns on investments (Borghini, Goltetto, & Rinallo, 2006; Hansen, 1996). In economic geography (EG), the literature that developed during the 2000s deviates in important respects from traditional IM approaches. It is based on a production perspective and builds on the local buzz and global pipeline model of cluster development to explore how firms in specialized industrial regions gain access to wider markets (Bathelt, Malmberg, & Maskell, 2004). This literature considers trade shows to be crucial events that enable local producers to link with non-local partners, for

the purposes of gaining access to new markets and acquiring important information about technologies and production conditions in distant regional/national contexts. From this knowledge-based perspective, trade shows are conceived as temporary clusters where forms of organized proximity make it possible for firms to interact with and learn from geographically distant actors and, as a result, escape the negative aspects of embeddedness (Maskell, Bathelt, & Malmberg, 2006).

In this conceptual paper, we critically review the literature on trade shows in IM and EG. In so doing, we seek to contribute to the ongoing conversation between these two disciplines and show that they can productively learn from each other. We aim to highlight how studies in IM have influenced EG research and suggest specific ways in which an EG perspective could revitalize IM research on trade shows. From this perspective, IM literature can be criticized for undertheorizing space, downplaying the role of trade shows as platforms for resource interaction, and conceiving exhibitors as individual agents. In other words, it neglects the fact that many of these events are collective marketing platforms that industry agglomerations or geographical clusters can use to affirm their presence in international markets. Based on our analysis, we propose research directions that can benefit individual exhibitors as well as geographically based business networks. The analysis addresses the boundaries and limitations of disciplinary analyses and

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strongly suggests transdisciplinary encounters and engagements in IM and EG research.

This paper is structured as follows. In Sections 2 and 3, we review the literature on trade shows in IM and EG with a comparative analysis that highlights key differences and emerging areas of convergence. Section 4 discusses the impact of IM on EG geography views on trade shows by showing how an understanding of these events as temporary marketplaces contributes to a better understanding of the role these events play in the globalizing knowledge economy. Section 5 identifies the prospects of integrating an EG perspective into IM studies by refining classic tools and theoretical perspectives and moving from an individualistic to a collective and even spatial understanding in the analysis of trade shows. This helps to identify the challenges and tasks of a future research agenda that is built on a comprehensive knowledge perspective. Section 6 summarizes the main arguments and makes a strong case for a transdisciplinary research agenda and methodology.

2. Trade shows in industrial marketing: A brief literature review

In this section, we briefly review IM scholarship on trade shows by highlighting the metaphors adopted, reasons for theoretical interest, concerns, theoretical underpinning, actors investigated, and emerging areas of convergence with EG literature (see Table 1). Trade shows are temporary marketplaces where suppliers from an industry or product group gather to showcase their products and services (Black, 1986) to current and potential buyers, the media, and other purchase influencers. Economists regard these events as transaction cost-saving institutions that, by bringing together (at the same time and in the same place) a large number of suppliers, reduce the time and cost associated with industrial buyers' purchasing processes (Florio, 1994). Literature on trade shows in IM has evolved independently from EG and as a whole can be said to pay limited attention to geographical structures and spatial relations.

Marketing and management scholars started investigating trade shows in the late 1960s with the aim of providing guidance to industrial marketers concerned with the 'exorbitant cost of exhibiting' on how to make the most of these promotional tools (Banting & Blenkhorn, 1974; Bellizzi & Lipps, 1984; Bonoma, 1983; Carman, 1968; Cavanaugh, 1976; Kerin & Cron, 1987). Firms operating in industrial markets typically invest a large part of their promotional budget to exhibit at these events

(Golfetto, 2004), which are particularly useful to contact industrial buyers in the key stages of the purchase process, where they evaluate alternative solutions, products, and suppliers (Gopalakrishna & Lilien, 1995; see also Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy, 2002; Moriarty & Spekman, 1984; Parasuraman, 1981). As such, IM research has been focused on measuring and maximizing trade show results (see, among others, Dekimpe, François, Gopalakrishna, Lilien, & Van den Bulte, 1997; Gopalakrishna & Lilien, 1995; Gopalakrishna & Williams, 1992; Gopalakrisna, Lilien, Williams, & Sequeira, 1995; Hansen, 2004; Herbig, O'Hara, & Palumbo, 1993; Ling-yeo, 2007, 2008; Sashi & Perretty, 1992; Seringhaus & Rosson, 2001; Shoham, 1999; Smith, Gopalakrishna, & Smith, 2004; Tanner, 2002; Williams, Gopalakrishna, & Cox, 1993).

By linking exhibitors' pre-show, show, and post-show activities to indicators of communication and sales performance, IM researchers sought to provide industrial marketers with empirical generalizations on best practices that maximize the outcomes of exhibitors' participation at trade shows. Initially focused on sales outcomes (such as generating leads or converting trade show contacts into orders), the increasingly sophisticated modeling literature has more recently adopted multidimensional measures of performance that highlight the role of these events in promoting brand image in industrial markets (e.g. Hansen, 2004). Building on previous accounts of exhibitor/visitor interaction at trade shows (Evers & Knight, 2008; Rice, 1992; Rosson & Seringhaus, 1995; Sarmento, Simões, & Farhangmehr, 2015) theoretically grounded in the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) research tradition (Ford, 1980; Ford et al., 1998; Håkansson, 1992; Håkansson, Ford, Gadde, Snehta, & Waluszewski, 2009), more recent work has moved beyond the initial emphasis on one-way promotional communication flows from exhibitors (industrial marketers) to visitors (industrial buyers) by highlighting that trade shows are events where firms learn from one another (Bettis-Outland, Cromartie, Johnston, & Borders, 2010; Bettis-Outland, Johnston, & Wilson, 2012; Borghini et al., 2006; Ling-yeo, 2006; Rinallo, Borghini, & Golfetto, 2010).

While effectiveness issues have been a major preoccupation of IM scholarship on trade shows, other research streams have investigated appropriate goals for these events (Bonomo, 1983; O'Hara, Palumbo, & Herbig, 1993; Rosson & Seringhaus, 1995; Sharlang & Balogh, 1996; Shipley & Wong, 1993; Shoham, 1992; Tanner & Chonko, 1995), the decision to participate in trade shows (Kijewski et al., 1993; Lilien, 1993), and the selection of trade shows (Bello & Barczak, 1990; Faria & Dickinson, 1985). From this perspective, visitor behavior is less often the object of analysis (Bello, 1992; Bello & Lohtia, 1993; Blythe, 2002; Godar & O'Connor, 2001; Hansen, 1996; Rinallo et al., 2010), although visitors are generally of interest if they are members of buying centers, i.e. individuals with influence over their employers' purchase processes.

To date, trade show organizers (who design, produce, and market these events) have received scant attention in the IM literature. Munuera and Ruiz (1999) conceptualized trade shows as services and conducted a study on visitor behavior with the goal of providing organizers with managerial implications. More recently, Rinallo and Golfetto (2006) analyzed a French trade show organizer's strategy and highlighted that these events can be collective marketing platforms for the (often geographically bounded) industrial networks that support them. Through their industrial associations, these networks are often actively involved in their organization, as they realize the importance of trade show organizers' value-creation strategies for exhibitors' profit-maximizing practices (Golfetto & Gibbert, 2006; Golfetto et al., 2008; Rinallo, Golfetto, & Gibbert, 2006).

In summary, IM literature on trade shows has mostly adopted a 'geography-free' approach. This is ironic, given the role these events play in industrial firms' internationalization and export promotion processes (Evers & Knight, 2008; O'Hara et al., 1993; Seringhaus & Rosson, 1994). Only in recent years has it become possible to identify lines of convergence between IM and EG research based on the attention given to these events as contexts where firms can learn from one

Table 1
Trade shows in industrial marketing and economic geography:
Key differences and areas of convergence.

Category of comparison	Industrial marketing	Economic geography
Metaphor Reasons for interest	Temporary marketplaces Important promotional tools for industrial marketers	Temporary clusters Missing links between internal cluster processes and external agents and knowledge pools
Key concerns	Mostly measuring and maximizing trade show results	Understanding learning processes occurring at and facilitated by trade shows
Theoretical underpinnings	Mostly empirical generalizations in marketing Some studies focusing on exhibitor/visitor interaction, theoretically grounded in the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) research tradition	Relational economic geography (in particular, the local buzz and global pipelines model)
Key actors investigated	Mostly exhibitors	Exhibitors and visitors
Areas of convergence	Increased attention to learning as a dimension of trade shows' performance Attention to organizers and collective marketing	Increased attention on market-related learning processes at trade shows Attention on organizers and their knowledge-based strategies

another and as collective promotional tools for industrial networks. Even recent IM conceptualizations undertheorize space and do not engage with literature in EG. In the following section, we introduce literature on trade shows from the perspective of Relational Economic Geography and highlight how key ideas and concepts from IM have enabled economic geographers to go beyond the limits of early formulations.

3. Trade shows in economic geography: Temporary clusters and central nodes in the global knowledge economy

3.1. An introduction to relational economic geography

EG developed as a subdiscipline in geography to analyze spatial aspects in the distribution of economic activity (e.g. [Berry, Conkling, & Ray, 1987](#); [Dicken & Lloyd, 1990](#), among others). By applying a spatial perspective to economic analyses, EG research sought to provide answers to questions relating to the distribution and location of industrial activities: How can firms' and industries' location decisions be explained? How do spatial disparities result from economic activity? How do market mechanisms contribute to spatial equilibria? Why do some regions grow faster than others? Related research developed a special interest in analyzing and understanding the growth of economic agglomerations. Much of this work was inspired by neoclassical economics, although it became clear that optimization principles are unable to explain the unequal spatial distribution of firms and sustained disequilibria. Parallel to the development of the cluster concept in the management literature by [Porter \(1990, 1998\)](#), EG and innovation researchers understood that, in order to explain spatial economic shifts and economic disparities, it was necessary to analyze industrial firms and their production contexts (e.g. [Amin & Robins, 1990](#); [Amin & Thrift, 1992](#); [Gertler, 1993](#)) instead of aggregate regional growth. While this trend developed over a longer period, it gave rise to what was later referred to as Relational Economic Geography ([Boggs & Rantisi, 2003](#); [Bathelt & Glückler, 2003, 2011](#); [Sunley, 2008](#)).

The relational approach, which developed as one stream in the field of EG, suggests that the analysis of spatial agglomerations of industries requires an investigation of how firms in a region act and interact with one another, how they organize and co-organize production, innovation, and distribution, and how they engage effectively in complex social and spatial divisions of labor within and across spatial boundaries – sometimes on a global scale ([Faulconbridge, 2006, 2008](#); [Yeung, 2005](#)). In other words, relational geographical approaches focus on agents (the typical unit of analysis is the firm, although other agents are sometimes taken into consideration) and how their practices are affected by and, in turn, affect space.

Relational and knowledge-based explanations of industrial clusters have become attractive because cost-based explanations cannot fully explain clustering processes ([Pinch, Henry, Jenkins, & Tallmann, 2003](#)). One relevant contribution is the buzz and pipelines model, which suggests that firms benefit from being located in a cluster not just through cost-efficient local transactions but also through access to relevant information and knowledge directly related to their industry or technology contexts ([Bathelt et al., 2004](#); [Bathelt, 2007](#)). Owing to a concentration of firms producing similar and complementary products, a large variety of information and knowledge exists within such a cluster that can easily be accessed and is constantly updated through planned and unplanned exchanges. This *local buzz* ([Gertler, 1995](#); [Storper & Venables, 2004](#)) feeds into localized learning processes and generates incentives for further agglomeration and the development of specialized labor markets that enable swift knowledge transfers.

It is clear that clusters of a certain size cannot exist as isolated entities because they require access to external markets to grow and need to develop linkages to knowledge that is not locally available ([Owen-Smith & Powell, 2004](#); [Scott, 1998](#)). Accordingly, they need to open up systematically and develop connections with other regional

and national economies to keep up with technology and market developments and avoid potentially harmful regional lock-in processes ([Grabher, 1993](#); [Uzzi, 1997](#)). The model of local buzz and trans-local (or global) pipelines that developed from these considerations ([Bathelt, 2007](#); [Bathelt & Glückler, 2011](#); [Maskell & Malmberg, 2007](#)) picks up on the different types of knowledge flows that develop in such a context and connects internal and external learning dynamics. It suggests that successful clusters need to have a strong ecology of internal and external knowledge linkages in order to direct new knowledge from the outside into the cluster processes and to feed localized learning targeted at the development of new products and processes.

3.2. Trade shows in relational economic geography: From permanent to temporary clusters

In this line of thought, trade shows have become a missing link that connects internal cluster processes with external agents and knowledge pools (see [Table 1](#)). While much of EG work on clusters in the 1980s and 1990s concentrated on localized synergies and the network effects of regional industry agglomerations, the buzz and pipelines model suggested that cluster success should be viewed as connecting internal and external cycles of knowledge generation and opening network relations geographically. This argument led to questions related to how firms in clusters go about systematically acquiring knowledge about non-local market opportunities and technology developments and how they would establish connections with non-local partners. Questions such as these directed EG research to become more interested in the roles of trade shows ([Maskell et al., 2006](#)). Similarly to the work of the French proximity school ([Boschma, 2005](#); [Rallet & Torre, 1999](#)), trade shows were viewed as events where firms from an organizational field get together, showcase their latest products and technological developments, and have the opportunity to link up with firms from other regions and countries ([Norcliffe & Rendace, 2003](#); [Power & Jansson, 2008](#)).

In recognizing that the composition of actors and firms as well as the nature of horizontal and vertical knowledge exchanges resemble those in permanent clusters, major trade shows were viewed as opportunities to acquire first-hand (and face-to-face) knowledge about non-local markets and actors. [Fig. 1](#) illustrates the idea behind such exchanges. At any given moment, firms in a permanent cluster interact both with other clustered actors through local buzz and with trans-local and international actors through global pipelines (see [Fig. 1A](#)). Specifically, [Fig. 1B](#) suggests that cluster firms (as well as non-cluster firms) attend major trade shows in their industry to gain access to new markets, get in contact with customers and suppliers, and acquire relevant information about their industry and technology context. These events resemble miniature versions of global industry clusters with a multitude of firms that are horizontally linked as competitors and vertically related as suppliers or users. During the events, they engage in intensive interaction with all these actors around topics that shape their day-to-day interactions and problem-solving processes, referred to as *global buzz* ([Maskell et al., 2006](#)). Consequently, they develop and maintain networks, find potential future partners, scan other markets, watch their competitors, and use the events as a benchmark to evaluate developments in the industry ([Bathelt & Schuldt, 2008, 2010](#)). Based on such interactions and knowledge acquisition patterns during trade shows, firms further existing networks and promote trans-local linkages over time. They also approach new markets and extend their spatial reach in consecutive steps (see [Fig. 1C](#)). Such knowledge eventually flows back into cluster networks (or other industrial contexts) to update and strengthen existing learning structures ([Ramírez-Pasillas, 2010](#)).

In this line of research, trade shows are conceptualized as temporary clusters ([Maskell et al., 2006](#); [Ramírez-Pasillas, 2008](#)) that enable participating firms to engage in intensive interaction based on organized proximity ([Torre & Rallet, 2005](#)). Temporary clusters are multidimensional relational spaces where firms can learn through interaction

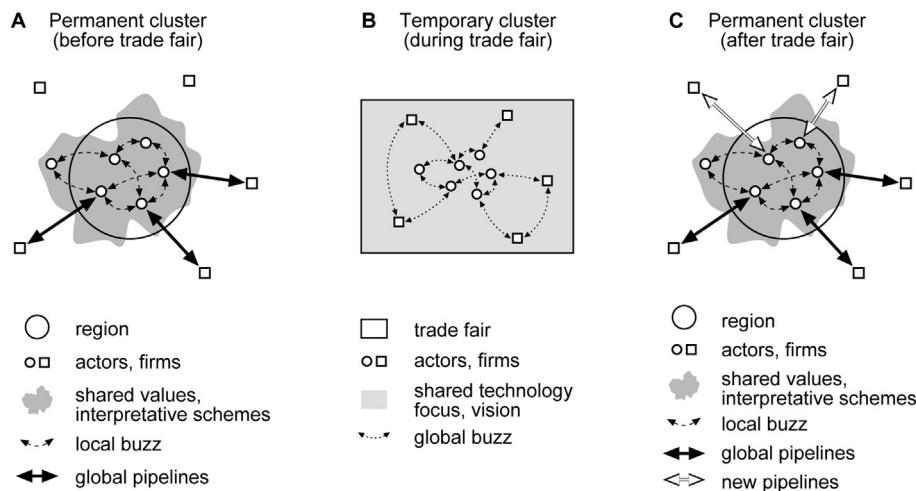


Fig. 1. Trade shows as temporary clusters and relationships with permanent clusters Source: Bathelt & Schulte, 2008, p.856.

processes with peers, existing or potential value-chain partners, and third parties. Besides their vertical dimension, trade shows offer a unique overview of competition, especially at large international hub events, and they create opportunities for horizontal learning by showing what is going on in the field and which new products competitors are developing. Such feedback generates benchmarks for industrial production and innovation and becomes an important source for firms' decision-making processes. These events also form an important mechanism for technical communities that partly overlap and partly differ to update their knowledge of the organizational field and to discuss technological, market, and political changes. Trade shows thus establish a crucial institutional dimension and provide an effective mechanism to reproduce the related communities and their underlying industries (Bathelt & Schulte, 2010).

4. Industrial marketing's impacts on economic geography views regarding trade shows

While initial EG research brought new dynamics and a broader disciplinary approach to trade show studies, it also had weaknesses that would have been easy to correct from an IM perspective. First, EG research largely focused on an upstream perspective and investigated the potential feedbacks from trade shows on production and innovation activities, but it widely neglected market-related interactions and their important consequences for knowledge creation and exchange. This research underemphasized the fact that trade shows are in the first place temporary markets that find their *raison d'être* in the needs of industrial marketers to promote their new products to potential buyers. In fact, these events are mostly 'paid for' by the promotional investments of industrial suppliers (exhibitors) – a fact that has an impact on who can have access to learning and the knowledge that can be exchanged at these events.

Second, initial research tended to investigate individual events as discrete entities and failed to distinguish between different trade show types and their resulting knowledge ecologies. In each industry, there is a multitude of trade shows, each with different timing, marketing function, and target markets – a fact long recognized in the IM literature (Bello & Barczak, 1990; Faria & Dickinson, 1985). IM research investigated such differences to help exhibitors select the trade shows best suited to reach their marketing goals and to address target market segments more cost-effectively. In reality, exhibitors and visitors regularly attend various trade shows, following the rhythms of innovation processes and buying time in their respective industries. In most industries, the dates of trade shows are nicely arranged one after another to keep overlaps to a minimum and avoid forcing potential exhibitors

and visitors to choose between competing events (e.g. Modemonline, 2014). Trade shows serving a given industry are therefore interrelated because some exhibitors and visitors may attend more than one of them (Power & Jansson, 2008), although this is not always the case (Gibson & Bathelt, 2014). The interrelatedness of trade shows and the differentiated functions they serve have mostly been neglected in EG research.

Third, EG literature initially paid only limited attention to the roles of trade show organizers (who, in this regard, may be conceived of as temporary cluster organizers). By contrast, the organizers' roles in creating the contextual conditions for exhibitors' promotional activities have been well recognized in the IM literature (Golfetto & Rinallo, 2008; Rinallo & Golfetto, 2006). Specifically, from a knowledge-based perspective, these actors can be considered 'organizers of organized proximity' whose activities can have a significant impact on exhibitors' and visitors' interactions at trade shows. Initial EG scholarship also neglected this point and characterized the knowledge ecologies that these events constitute as spontaneously emerging, without acknowledging that trade show organizers can affect exhibitors' and visitors' learning dynamics.

Over the past few years, attempts have been made to integrate IM insights systematically into EG work on trade shows. This has resulted in more comprehensive conceptualizations of these events. Building on IM scholarship, Rinallo and Golfetto (2011), for instance, suggest that by looking at trade shows as temporary markets, it is possible to gain a better understanding of how trade shows facilitate vertical interaction between exhibitors and 'typical' visitors (Borghini et al., 2006), such as industrial buyers and influencers, whereas other interaction types occur as a side-effect, when organizers do not actively discourage them. Related work highlights how trade show organizers, particularly when supported by entrepreneurial associations, adopt knowledge-based strategies to strengthen the competitiveness of their events compared with rival events elsewhere (Rinallo & Golfetto, 2011). This work, adopting a relational perspective, provided new insights into the 'trade show wars' that early geographers observed (Alix, 1922).

In a collaborative effort to integrate IM and EG findings, a recent monograph (Bathelt, Golfetto, & Rinallo, 2014) systematically examines the roles of trade shows in the globalizing knowledge economy and documents the knowledge-transfer and co-creation practices of visitors, exhibitors, and organizers. This attempt draws on the knowledge-based view of the firm (Maskell, 2001; Nonaka, 1994), which constitutes a 'common language' across the respective disciplinary views and presents empirical evidence of trade show developments in different industries and across various parts of the world (North America, Europe, and Asia) using a joint conceptual lens. This work also identifies the knowledge-based strategies that trade shows use to shape

visitors' and exhibitors' interactions and learning processes and to increase show competitiveness in relation to rival events (Bathelt et al., 2014).

An important outcome of this cooperation, which has relevant theoretical and methodological implications for both IM and EG research, is that there are different trade show types that fulfill different purposes and involve different forms of interaction. A fundamental way of distinguishing between trade shows is to compare the levels of international participation on the exhibitor-supplier and visitor-buyer sides with each other (Bathelt et al., 2014; Rinallo & Gelfetto, 2011). This leads to a four-fold typology of trade shows consisting of local exchange events, import shows, export shows, and international hub shows (see Fig. 2).

Import shows (with many international suppliers-exhibitors and mainly local buyers as visitors) offer exhibitors the opportunity to learn about local demand (producers, trade channels, customers, etc.), and they provide a better understanding of international competitors and their strategies on the local market. Typically, consumer shows belong in this category. When devoted to professional buyers, these trade shows are initially fairly important in emerging economies – before national manufacturing industries achieve a sufficient level of development (see Li, 2014). *Export shows* (with many international visitors and mainly local suppliers-exhibitors) offer exhibitors initial contacts with markets abroad and opportunities to learn more about local competitors' international strategies. Such events can, for instance, be found in countries where manufacturing industries are fragmented (e.g. in Italy). *Hub shows* (characterized by a predominance of foreign exhibitors and visitors) combine many of the elements of the previously mentioned trade show types. They offer many opportunities to learn about global industries, markets, innovations, and marketing practices. They represent an advanced stage of trade show development and usually take place in cities with high international or intercontinental accessibility, in the center of larger manufacturing areas. Many events in the main German trade show cities have such characteristics and have crucial import-export functions in Europe as a whole (Gelfetto & Rinallo, 2015; Rinallo & Gelfetto, 2011).

In the process of developing a joint knowledge-based conceptualization for the analysis of trade shows, recent EG work has continued to actively engage with and integrate IM insights into investigations of temporary clusters. A number of examples illustrate this: First, Li (2014) adopted Rinallo and Gelfetto's (2011) knowledge-based typology of trade shows to analyze the potential of production-related

learning processes at trade shows. By investigating trade shows in the context of developing economies in Southeast Asia, he argues that the extreme cases of pure international hub events, local exchange trade shows, and pure import or export shows do not provide the optimal setting for technological learning processes. Instead, a middle ground of events that supply a mix of domestic and international exhibitors and visitors can be crucial to establish the dynamic technological learning spaces for fruitful exchanges between domestic producers and international firms.

Second, going a step further, in a recent collection of research contributions Bathelt and Zeng (2015) conclude from an investigation of the rise and development of trade shows in the Asia-Pacific region that dynamic trade show activities are not just a secondary consequence of globalization processes but can also be viewed as drivers of such developments. Using a political economy approach, this work analyzes different national development trajectories and presents insightful evidence of how active state policies gave rise to dynamic trade show ecologies and how these events shaped economic upgrading processes. Third, recent work has also begun to apply the concept of the temporary cluster to the analysis of business conferences (Henn & Bathelt, 2015) as a next step to investigate other types of temporary business community get-togethers that enable these communities to solve coordination and management problems and reproduce their institutional foundations.

In summary, work in Relational Economic Geography on trade shows initially paid limited attention to the vast IM scholarship that deals with these promotional instruments and found limited use in the firm-based, 'geography-free' theorizations of IM scholarship and their related downstream focus on demand instead of production. It was through contributions that purposely 'translated' key concepts from IM into EG that IM scholarship began to have an impact on EG understandings of trade shows. Knowledge flows in the opposite direction have been less pronounced, and the question remains how an EG perspective could impact or enrich IM studies into these events.

5. Potential contributions of economic geography perspectives to industrial marketing research on trade shows

Based on our analysis, we suggest that EG views can help IM scholars in numerous ways to develop better conceptualizations of how trade shows and similar event types shape learning and knowledge co-creation, innovation, and, more generally, the marketing of firms and places. This knowledge-based perspective can contribute to several ongoing conversations in the IM literature (see Table 2 for an overview).

5.1. Contributions to research on learning and resource interaction at trade shows

In the IM field, trade shows are mainly seen as promotional instruments. The important role of these events in the circulation, exchange, and generation of knowledge has long been downplayed and understudied. IM scholarship only recently began to unpack the market-related learning processes at these events (Borghini et al., 2006; Gelfetto, 2004; Li, 2006, 2007; Rinallo et al., 2010; Zerbini & Borghini, 2012; Zerbini et al., 2006). To go deeper into this point, a brief introduction to the ways in which EG and IM conceptualize knowledge is necessary. Here, we focus on work in the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) research tradition (Ford, 1980; Ford et al., 1998; Håkansson, 1992; Håkansson et al., 2009), which has long investigated how learning and innovation processes take place across organizational and spatial boundaries. Therefore, it can engage more fruitfully with EG literature to produce a better understanding of trade shows as contexts for interaction, networking, and relationship building.

Building on the idea that tacit knowledge is sticky and difficult to transfer across locations (Polanyi, 1966; Szulanski, 2000; Von Hippel, 1994), IMP literature highlights that innovation typically originates in the context of business relationships (La Rocca & Snehota, 2014;

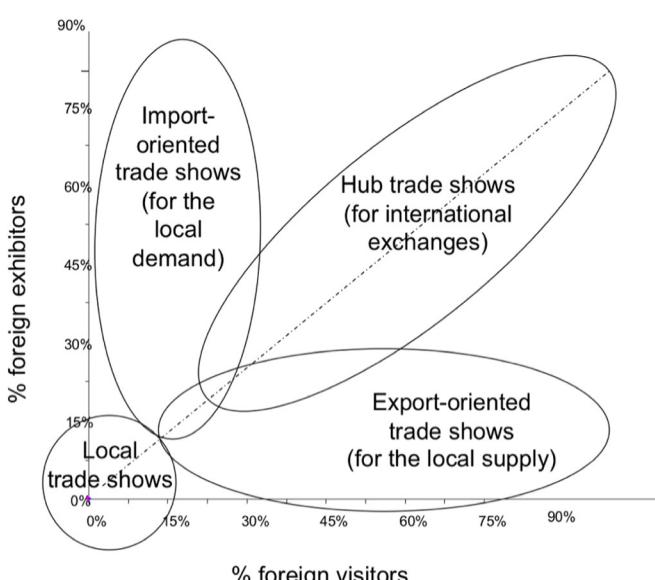


Fig. 2. Typology of trade shows according to exhibitor/visitor origin Source: Adapted from Rinallo & Gelfetto, 2011.

Table 2

Potential contributions of economic geography (EG) perspectives to industrial marketing (IM) research on trade shows.

Streams of research in IM	Focus	Examples of related research in IM	EG contributes to a better understanding of:
Learning and resource interaction at trade shows	Interactive learning and resource development facilitated by trade shows	Borghini et al., 2006; Li, 2006, 2007; Rinallo et al., 2010; Zerbini & Borghini, 2012; Zerbini, Gelfetto, & Gibert, 2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initial and recurring resource interactions facilitated by trade shows and their ongoing impacts on business relationships The role that trade shows play in the interaction between resources within and across organizational and spatial divides
Exhibitor performance	Measuring trade show results and identifying their determinants	Borghini et al., 2006; Geigenmüller & Bettis-Outland, 2012; Gopalakrishna et al., 2010; Munuera & Ruiz, 1999; Rinallo & Gelfetto, 2006, 2015; Tafesse, 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning as outcome of trade show participation Trade show organizers, their relationships with exhibitors and visitors, and their impact on exhibitor performances Trade shows as meeting places of occupational communities, the practices through which these communities create value and the ways in which firms can benefit from these practices Theoretical sampling in trade show performance studies, as results are contingent on the typology of trade show examined (e.g., import vs. export-oriented trade shows) and its geographical context (e.g., developed vs. developing countries)
Trade shows as collective marketing/branding/export promotion instruments for territorial and other typologies of networks	Trade shows as collective marketing/branding/export promotion instruments for territorial and other typologies of networks	Rinallo & Gelfetto, 2006; Seringhaus & Rosson, 1998; Skallerud, 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The nation brand building role of trade shows The impact of trade shows on the innovation trajectories of local and national industries The relationships between industrial clusters and trade shows, which are sometimes dysfunctional Collective trade show participation and export promotion from a knowledge-based perspective Impact of globalization on trade shows and their underlying industries, which affects the lifecycles of individual events and the evolution of continental trade show platforms.

Håkansson & Waluszewski, 2007). At the core of knowledge creation and innovation processes is the mutual deployment of resources that are successfully combined over extended interaction episodes (Baraldi & Waluszewski, 2005; Baraldi, Gressetvold, & Harrison, 2012; Gadde, Hjelmgrem, & Skarp, 2012; La Rocca & Snehota, 2014). From this perspective, the temporary nature of trade shows would not permit the type of extended interaction opportunities that business relationships enable. Even worse, according to most IMP theory, it is impossible to disentangle knowledge from the structures in which it is created (e.g., Eklund & Waluszewski, 2015), making it impossible for the knowledge that can circulate or spill over at trade show to be valuable.¹

Unlike other perspectives that link economics and geography,² Relational Economic Geography has long investigated the problematic nature of knowledge transfer across distance and organizational divides. In his review of related literature, Maskell (2014), for instance, highlights that a firm needs to identify sources of remote knowledge in relation to their specific needs before the transfer of remote knowledge can occur. When adopting this conceptual lens, the business relationships that form the central units of analysis in the IMP approach are the most appropriate sources of remote knowledge when a firm has high awareness of both the specific knowledge it needs and a suitable source that can provide or help co-produce such knowledge. By contrast, when firms lack a clear understanding of the kinds of knowledge that might be helpful or which source might best provide such knowledge, trade

shows can play a fundamental role in providing an overview of new ideas and alternative potential business partners (Borghini et al., 2006; Maskell, 2014; Rinallo et al., 2010).

While interaction episodes at trade shows might play an important role in the initial stages of the business relationship lifecycle, their cyclic nature means that they provide repeated occasions for resource interaction in the context of existing relationships. A useful model to classify and analyze resource interaction in inter-organizational networks is the 4R model (Håkansson & Waluszewski, 2002), which describes how four types of resources (products, facilities, organizational units, and inter-organizational relationships) interact with each other. While a full theoretical exploration of trade shows as platforms for ongoing resource interaction is beyond the goal of this paper, some general considerations are advanced in Table 3. Extant research, building on IMP scholarship, has already started exploring interaction at trade shows (Evers & Knight, 2008; Rice, 1992; Rosson & Seringhaus, 1995; Sarmento et al., 2015). The ideas advanced in this paper could strengthen this body of work and result in a more thorough understanding of the intra- and inter-organizational learning and resource interaction processes that these events facilitate.

Research on trade shows also provides a theoretical opportunity to better conceptualize space. The geographical localization of a firm has mostly been viewed as a hindrance to its operation in IM research (Håkansson, Tunisini, & Waluszewski, 2006). In the IMP research tradition, early contributions (Håkansson, 1982) equated space with distance, seen as an obstacle to social interaction between actors. More recent contributions, building on the industrial cluster literature, suggest that place can be a source of competitive advantage for individual firms and that it can be understood as a combination of resources that can be strategically combined with resources from other places to produce a competitive advantage across space (Håkansson et al., 2006).

Work in relational EG (for a review, see Bathelt et al., 2014) demonstrates that firms exhibiting at trade shows obtain crucial experiential knowledge about how to adapt their core productive competencies to the heterogeneous needs of customers in different industries and

¹ We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting these important issues.

² We refer in particular to Krugman's (1998) geographical economics, which – like other EG approaches – looks at how economic activity clusters and agglomerates in space. As a whole, geographical economics conceives of knowledge externalities in clusters as (relatively easy-to-access) information spillovers (see Döring and Schnellenbach, 2006, for a discussion of different typologies of knowledge spillovers). Such work, which has played an important role in introducing geographical notions to the field of economics, has been criticized for using a rather narrow perspective to analyze EG problems (e.g. Martin & Sunley, 1996). In short, like most fields, EG is characterized by a diversity of perspectives that do not all resonate well with the knowledge generation and learning perspective developed in IMP theory.

Table 3

Trade shows as a platform for resource interaction.

Resource types	Definition	Role of trade shows
Products	Combination of goods and services that are exchanged by organizational units or in the context of business relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At trade shows, firms showcase products and prototypes to current and potential business partners • Trade show dates set deadlines for developing innovations, forcing organizational units to cooperate under time pressures
Facilities	Resources that are employed to develop, manufacture, promote, and transport resources, such as equipment, plants, warehouses, and exhibition outlets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stands at trade shows are promotional facilities whose design affect interaction with customers and other business partners • Other resources (e.g. products, human resources, equipment, etc.) are physically present or represented (e.g. multi-media representation of plants) as signals of firm competence
Organizational units	Divisions, departments, informal groups, individuals, and other parts of an organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At trade shows, organizational units periodically get together and use the opportunity for cross-unit interaction • Trade shows provide organizational units with the opportunity to observe/-interact with customers, competitors, and other actors
Inter-organizational relationships	Long-term relationships with firms or other typologies of an organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trade shows provide opportunities to identify and select new partners • Trade shows also provide an opportunity to interact periodically with current business partners and some of their resources (products, organizational units, etc.)

Source: Our elaboration, based on the 4R Model (Håkansson & Waluszewski, 2002).

geographical markets thanks to deliberate and emerging interactions with numerous actors. Most firms have a trade show portfolio comprising multiple participations across a number of industries and geographical markets, which increases the number of opportunities for learning and resource interaction/combination previously described (see again Table 3). Future IM scholarship on learning at trade shows would benefit from the adoption of a geographic lens (Bathelt & Glückler, 2011) in their conceptualization of the processes through which trade shows in different parts of the world enable industrial marketers to tap into specific bases of market knowledge, observe the behavior of the competitors that serve these markets, and ultimately develop innovations that are suited to a variety of foreign needs and preferences. By better contextualizing the geography of learning, IM scholars may be able to have a more thorough understanding of the roles of trade shows in the internationalization of industrial firms, the development of complementary assets (Rothaermel, 2001a, 2001b; Teece, 1986) necessary to successfully commercialize and promote innovations, and, ultimately, the evolving focus of these players from a product to a market orientation (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Narver & Slater, 1990).

5.2. Contributions to research on exhibitors' performances

Empirical generalizations of exhibitors' performances constitute the bulk of IM research on trade shows. There are several ways in which

Relational Economic Geography perspectives can enrich attempts to measure and identify determinants of trade show performances.

First, research on trade shows is mostly focused on exhibitors and their interactions with visitors. Trade show organizers are still understudied from an IM perspective, even though these organizations can significantly impact interaction and learning at these events (Bathelt et al., 2014; Rinallo & Gelfetto, 2011, 2015, 2017) and, more importantly from an IM perspective, the effectiveness of exhibitors' promotional strategies. Such a perspective highlights how exhibitors and organizers are often in conflict with one another for various reasons that can range from stand location in the exhibition venue to changes in trade show strategy (e.g. date, hosting city or venue, admission of foreign exhibitors, etc.). To date, IM research has only hinted at how trade show organizers can affect individual exhibitors' value-creation and profit maximization (Borghini et al., 2006; Geigenmüller & Bettis-Outland, 2012; Gelfetto & Rinallo, 2008; Gopalakrishna, Roster, & Sridhar, 2010; Munuera & Ruiz, 1999; Rinallo & Gelfetto, 2006; Rinallo et al., 2006; Rinallo, Borghini, & Gelfetto, 2012). More research is needed to investigate organizer-visitor and organizer-exhibitor interactions and relationships, and to unpack the impact of organizers' competencies and activities on exhibitors' return on investment.

Second, the IM literature on visitor behavior at trade shows mostly sees these events as information sources used by industrial buyers in their purchasing processes (for a review and critique, see Borghini et al., 2006). A core concept of IM research is the buying center (Jackson, Keith, & Burdick, 1984; Johnston & Bonoma, 1981; Kohli, 1989; Lilien & Wong, 1984). A limited number of IM studies highlighted that buying center members belong to different occupational communities (Andersen, 2005; Araujo, 2004; Cayla, Cova, & Maltese, 2013; Rinallo, Gelfetto, & Borghini, 2007, 2008). Work in EG demonstrates that trade shows provide a meeting ground for different occupational communities (Bathelt et al., 2014; Bathelt & Schuldt, 2010) that are connected to the organizational field in different ways. Related studies characterize these groups as epistemic communities (Bathelt et al., 2014; Cohendet, Grandadam, Simon, & Capdevila, 2014) that engage in collective practices of sensemaking and knowledge creation. Marketing literature has already examined the practices through which communities of consumers collectively create value and the ways in which consumer brands can encourage and benefit from these practices (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009). Taking inspiration from corresponding work in EG and consumer marketing, the IM literature could systematically investigate the influence of networks within and across occupational communities and their impact on firms' buying and innovation processes.

Third, in terms of methodology, IM research on trade shows has paid limited attention to the fact that trade shows in different industries and different parts of the world are remarkably different from each other (Bathelt et al., 2014). Rinallo and Gelfetto's (2011) typology of trade shows (see Fig. 2) provides a first attempt at examining how trade show characteristics affect the specific knowledge circulation practices at given events. This taxonomy can also be used to inform trade shows' theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Yin, 1984) in empirical research. Similarly, IM research should pay more attention to context – a crucial analytical category in Relational Economic Geography – as predictors of trade show performance might be contingent on the type of trade show examined and the geographic context in which an event is situated. For example, the performances obtained in a hub trade show in Germany might differ radically from those in an import-oriented trade show in China. Treating trade shows as if they were similarly structured events makes it difficult to interpret empirical evidence accurately and to generalize findings across industries and events. Therefore, IM researchers should try to avoid essentializing trade shows as if they were homogenous events irrespective of location and industry.

We conclude by noting that most IM research on trade shows is carried out in a North American or European context, where the trade show business is mature (Bathelt et al., 2014). Asia, and to a lesser

extent South America and Eastern Europe, are characterized by smaller but high-growth trade show markets (CERMES, 2014). By disregarding geography, IM trade show literature downplays the effects of globalization forces on these events. An EG perspective helps to provide a contextual understanding of how macro-level factors affecting global supply chains are driving the trade show industry's evolution. Unsurprisingly, EG is presently devoting more attention to trade shows in Asia and other non-Western countries (Bathelt & Zeng, 2015; Gelfetto & Rinallo, 2015; Li, 2014; Vendrusculo, 2016). IM work in these emerging trade show countries is not the center of attention. Future research on trade show performance should help exhibitors – whether local industrial marketers or foreign firms seeking to enter these markets – make the most of their investments in these contexts, too.

5.3. Contributions to research on trade shows as collective marketing tools

Finally, EG perspectives on trade shows can also inspire IM scholars to explore the relevance of these events from a collective marketing perspective (Rinallo & Gelfetto, 2006), which to date has attracted only limited attention. Here, we discuss promising areas for future research: First, industry associations and other industry actors sometimes use trade shows as collective promotional platforms. This happens frequently in the case of export-oriented shows, which trade associations tend to organize or strongly support. Bathelt et al. (2014) report a number of empirical cases showing how Italian trade shows in different industries have helped local manufacturers, through the mediation of trade associations, to promote their competencies and create a collective nation brand (see literature on country-of-origin effects, e.g. Al-Sulaiti & Baker, 1998; Dinnie, 2004; Peterson & Jolibert, 1995; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). Building on anthropological theory on trade fairs (Peñaloza, 2000, 2001), Bathelt et al. (2014) highlight these events' culture-producing functions and their roles in presenting the historical roots of local/national industries to international markets and educating industrial buyers and other market actors about the functional and symbolic qualities of locally manufactured products. More research is needed regarding this collective level of marketing (Felzensztein, Stringer, Benson-Rea, & Freeman, 2014; Nicholson, Tsagdis, & Brennan, 2013). By creating a positive nation brand and by attracting foreign buyers, trade shows may be especially beneficial to the survival and growth of smaller industrial firms.

Second, work in EG highlights the fact that trade shows can affect the innovation trajectories of their underlying industries. For instance, Rinallo and Gelfetto (2011) found that trade show organizers in clothing textiles invest in market research about emerging fashion trends that is mostly disseminated to small and medium-sized exhibitors, which incorporate the results of such research (e.g. in terms of colors, patterns, or raw materials) into their new products. Similarly, Bathelt et al. (2014) found that Italy's Salone del Mobile furniture show attracted the attention of international media and retailers by providing visibility to collaborations between furniture makers and designers. The commercial benefits resulting from such exposure stimulated other Italian furniture manufacturers to invest in developing their design capabilities. IM research could benefit from macro-level longitudinal examinations of trade shows and their broader impacts on the patterns of innovation of local and national industries.

Third, given the recent emphasis on industrial clusters and networks in IM research (Cantù, 2010; Corsaro, Cantù, & Tunisini, 2012; Eklinger-Frick, Eriksson, & Hallén, 2011, 2012), an EG perspective draws attention to the links between localized industries and trade shows (see Fig. 1). Work in EG highlights that some trade shows tend to restrict access to non-local exhibitors as the organizers, controlled by local industry associations, adopt a protectionist attitude (Rinallo & Gelfetto, 2011). From a knowledge-based perspective, such approaches result in limited exhibitor learning at these events, which is related to a lack of opportunities to observe non-local competitors. Phrased differently, some trade shows may reproduce the institutional lock-in

problem of permanent clusters (Boschma, 2005), which is found in geographical areas where embedded economic actors are at risk of becoming self-referential and less open to external stimuli for change. IM research on industrial networks should therefore critically examine the relationships between geographically embedded clusters and trade shows, which may prove dysfunctional and eventually become an obstacle to firm internationalization.

Fourth, an EG perspective draws attention to (often publicly subsidized) collective participations at trade shows, which are considered necessary during the early stages of firms' internationalization process, when they lack the organizational skills and financial resources to attend foreign trade shows (Seringhaus & Rosson, 1998; Skallerud, 2010). Research on this end has shown that 'collective stands' underperform compared with individual stands (Seringhaus & Rosson, 1998; Skallerud, 2010) – the managerial implication of such findings is that industrial marketers, as soon as they can afford it, should give up collective participations in favor of individual stands. A knowledge-based perspective can revolutionize the logic behind these export promotion initiatives. It can shift from being based on renting larger exhibition areas that are split between local exhibitors (collective stand logic) to designing persuasive experiences for visitors by means of appropriate contents and stand designs, the selection of specific exhibitors (especially market leaders), and the organization of leisure and cultural events. Such strategic concept design would seek to create a specific image for the region, its producers, and their competencies. Some actors (including export promotion state agencies and trade show organizers) have already started working in this direction and paved the way for IM researchers to empirically explore the conditions under which these initiatives can create value for such little-understood temporary networks.

Finally, work in EG emphasizes the global spatial perspective that ultimately affects industrial buyers' behavior, industrial marketers' promotional strategies, trade shows' competitiveness, and the evolving territorial distribution of the global trade show industry. The roles of trade shows in the context of individual and collective marketing strategies cannot be analyzed independently from global trends in their underlying industries, which affect the lifecycles of specific events and the evolution of continental trade show platforms (Bathelt et al., 2014; Gelfetto & Rinallo, 2015).

Both exhibitors' evolving trade show portfolios and trade show lifecycles are affected by macroeconomic dynamics. By becoming more aware of geographic context, IM scholarship on trade shows may be able to provide better guidance to trade show organizers and, ultimately, the actors using these events as marketing tools: exhibitors and industry associations, as well as export promotion authorities, policy markers, and local governments.

6. Conclusion

This paper critically reviews literature on trade shows developed in the fields of Industrial Marketing (IM) and Economic Geography (EG). In IM, trade shows are conceived as promotional instruments through which firms operating in industrial markets strengthen their brands and build and maintain relationships with current and potential buyers. In EG, trade shows are seen as temporary clusters through which firms can escape the liabilities of embeddedness and interact with (and learn from) distant actors. Our analysis shows that IM scholarship has provided a means for EG literature to go beyond earlier formulations, which did not pay enough attention to the fact that trade shows are temporary markets sustained by exhibitors' promotional investments. By integrating insights from IM, EG literature has generated more comprehensive conceptualizations of trade shows that acknowledge the predominance of vertical relationships between industrial suppliers and purchasers, as well as the knowledge-based strategies organizers can adopt to make their events knowledge-rich places for exhibitors and visitors. We also noted that IM scholarship, while recently highlighting learning as a key dimension of exhibitors' trade show performance, can be criticized

for undertheorizing space and not engaging with EG literature on these events and their role in the global knowledge economy. Building on these premises, we suggest that EG literature could enrich IM trade show scholarship about learning and resource interaction at trade shows, exhibitor performance, and trade shows as collective marketing instruments (see Table 2).

We conclude with some remarks on the benefits and challenges of transdisciplinary research, based on our own experience of boundary spanning and co-authorship across IM and EG, during which our understanding of trade shows was enriched beyond our expectations. From this experience, we realize that transdisciplinary research has a number of important advantages, including exposure to different research questions, literatures, and methodologies. As a result, it is possible to critically examine seemingly established and rarely questioned views within a field and develop a more thorough understanding of the empirical phenomenon under investigation. Transdisciplinary endeavors along these lines have undeniable merits, but we must confess that some aspects could easily get 'lost in translation,' and parent discipline observers might consider the resulting work to be superficial. Transdisciplinary research – beyond the superficial appropriation of key ideas – is notoriously difficult and threatened by numerous pitfalls. Disciplinary language and underlying theoretical perspectives may lead to divergent interpretations of the same empirical phenomena. For example, an EG researcher observing an import-oriented trade show in Asia may see limited opportunities for learning and knowledge exchanges, whereas an IM scholar may see many options. Why? The former may focus on reduced technological knowledge exchanges, while the latter may point at learning opportunities related to market interactions.

Additionally, the publication of truly transdisciplinary research does not go unchallenged. Expectations in terms of methodological rigor, construction of theoretical arguments, and practical implications vary remarkably, and journal editors and reviewers are not always knowledgeable about, or tolerant of, approaches that are not part of the mainstream in their home discipline. For transdisciplinary research to be published, academic gatekeepers must be willing not only to accept the 'otherness' of approaches and perspectives from cognate disciplines but also to engage actively with these differences and recognize their potential for reciprocal enrichment. It takes time and a great degree of acceptance to develop a shared understanding and a common vocabulary across disciplines. Extended face-to-face interactions, seminars, joint workshops, special sessions at conferences, special issues of academic journals, and edited books may therefore be crucial to develop shared research repertoires (from language to methodology) and engage in collective sensemaking.

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