Street Vending: Exploring the Transformative Impact of ‘Forgotten’ Services

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This research explores street vending to understand how such businesses operate as service to multiple groups. Our findings show viewing street vending as a nuisance and something to eliminate is shortsighted. Street vendors are entrepreneurs, reaping economic benefits from calculated efforts; benefits extend to consumers, families, communities, and society large.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Over a decade ago there was a call to explore less “developed” markets and economies (Bolton 2003, Steenkamp 2005); understanding how marketing and service phenomena manifest in emerging markets and economies is the only way to develop truly generalizable knowledge (Burgess & Steenkamp 2006). However, the majority of service research remains focused on the most affluent while two thirds of the world’s population live in poverty (Fisk et al. 2016). Service researchers need to better understand what is going on in the rest of the world to be able to move beyond the historically narrow versions of economic and market realities. Additionally, service researchers have been called on to apply their skill and effort to explore how and when service can be transformative – for providers, consumers; individuals and collectives (Anderson et al. 2013). This research fulfills both calls. It explores service, and services, at the base of the pyramid (Gebauer & Reynoso 2013); street vending as a creative, entrepreneurial art (Williams & Gurtoo 2013); and shows how these relate to individual, collective, and societal well-being (Anderson et al. 2013). Specifically, this research explores the ‘ forgotten’ service street vending to understand how such businesses operate as service to multiple people and groups.

Street vending is small scale, often informal and sometimes illegal, business efforts. Street vending takes many forms but always happens on the street - in traffic, along the street, and inside and outside of ‘formal’ markets. It occurs in every economy and has likely existed forever (Jhabvala 2012). Street vending is entrepreneurship for the marginalized and working poor; often its operators are persecuted, oppressed, and victimized (Bhowmik 2012; Jhabvala 2012). We propose and support how the view of street vending globally as a nuisance and blight on cities that should to be removed is wrong and expose how street vending is a creative, entrepreneurial art serving not only entrepreneurs but also broader circles of consumers. This research establishes how street vending, in its many manifestations, is service for vendors, consumers, collectives, and their networks. Moreover, this research exposes how street vending offers well-being uplift for consumers, vendors, families, communities, and society in ways that transcend typical economic arguments.

To explore these phenomena, a qualitative research program is undertaken that combines a grounded theory approach with phenomenological understanding. A multicultural field study of street vending in multiple communities in Kenya, Colombia, Peru, and Lebanon is undertaken. Primary data includes individual and collective interviews with vendors inquiring of their daily, lived experiences; who they serve; and who benefits from their work. Additional interviews are conducted with consumers of street vendor’s products and services. This data is complemented with observations of street vending; including vendors and consumers. This multicultural, multi-locale approach permits a more robust and holistic view of street vending as a service.

Based on our data and situated in current understanding of street vending in diverse literature, we propose a new conceptualization of street vending as a complex and unique service. Our findings reveal a ripple effect starting at the micro level of individual interactions affecting the well-being of the involved actors and transcending these dyadic relationships to encompass higher levels of collective well-being.

Findings in the data support claims made in literature and in this research. Service and serving manifest in multiple ways. First, street vending serves economically by offering a livelihood otherwise nonexistent. Vendors live self-determined and more financially secure lives rather than being destitute and street vending provides gainful employment in many developing, and some developed, economies. Second, street vending provides consumers access to products and services in markets, in route, and in neighborhoods; making available goods and services so customers save time, money, and effort. Third, street vending serves to uplift vendor, family, and community well-being. Vendors are sustained and their families consume at a higher level, both for subsistence and for growth in areas like schooling and healthcare. Finally, street vendors expand their businesses, open other businesses, and hire workers in their communities. In total, these benefits bubble up to the community level and across the city and nation as groups experience enhanced well-being.

Our findings show that viewing street vending as a nuisance and something to eliminate is shortsighted. Street vendors are entrepreneurs, reaping economic benefits from calculated efforts; benefits that extend to families, communities, cities, and society large. Finally, we conclude that most of the current research trends are not necessarily applicable in developing settings and therefore propose a number of future research directions hoping to stimulate further interest in these “forgotten” services.

REFERENCES

Williams, Colin C. and Gurtoo, Anjula (2013); Beyond Entrepreneurs as Heroic Icons of Capitalist Society: A Case Study of Street Entrepreneurs in India; International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business; Volume 19, Number 4, pp. 421-437.