Consuming the Streets - Story of a Street Peddler
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As an alternative consumption space in informal commerce, street peddlers provide an immediate service to passersby using creative product presentations or social performances. Individual accounts of street vendors have been neglected in consumption research. Utilizing interviews, the article aims to make a contribution to the marketplaces cultures domain.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Informal retailers are described as “dealers whose shops consist solely of portable stalls or modified vehicles, whose cachement areas are determined by whatever market circuits the vendor choses to travel, whose income may or may not be reported accurately to tax authorities” (Sherry, 2001). Street vendors contribute to the overall economic activity, to sustaining themselves as well as their dependents, to the expansion of the range of places and times where goods and services are provided. They are also seen as manifestations of a peaceful and informal revolution of hard-working poor people against a regulatory state promoting the interests of big businesses. Informal commerce has become a lifesaving opportunity for the unemployed in many countries. As an alternative consumption space in informal commerce, street peddlers provide an immediate service to passers by either using creative product presentations or social performances such as street cries or demonstrations. Individual accounts of street vendors have been a neglected area in consumption research and this study will try to invite the reader to take a glimpse into the life of a street vendor to introduce the reader to the behind-the-scenes of the informal market retailing, consumption. The article aims to make a contribution to the marketplaces cultures domain (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) and provides a case study of a vendor in Istanbul to demonstrate the interactions between the buyers and seller as well as map his consumption space in terms of human interaction, space allocation and advertising practices.

Literature suggests that peddling has developed in Turkey as a result of internal migration from rural areas especially in the last 30 years (Akgeyik, Yavuz, Ersoz, Ozdemir, & Senocak, 2004). As internal rural-urban migrants are unable to find formal employment in urban settings, they are inclined to work informally as street peddlers. Peddling has turned into a social reality characterizing the income dimension of a certain lifestyle (p.20). One of the most striking qualities of informal commerce jobs is the fact that these jobs are found hastily and as means of income, not as a career step. People who are involved in informal sector jobs in Istanbul are mainly interested in finding a source of income for themselves and their families. Without the fixed costs of taxes, store rent, electricity or water bills, street peddlers are able to offer lower priced yet lower quality products or services compared to their formal settled competitors. In the Turkish context, lower priced products satisfy the demands of many low-income consumers. As the internal migration continues from rural to urban areas resulting in low-income consumer masses, demand for street peddling sector increases. Thus, street peddling and informal commerce are guaranteed to be long lasting (Baştaymaz, 1999, p.3) in Istanbul. Another factor supporting street peddling in urban areas is the fact that establishing a formal business is a costly and a long procedural process. Starting a business by completing the legal procedures creates significant limitations for low-income people and it becomes a discouraging construct for individual entrepreneurs. As a result, those who want to be producers or sellers with their individual initiative opt for the easiest way, namely street peddling (Akgeyik, Yavuz, Ersoz, Ozdemir, & Senocak, 2004, p.52). In times of economic crises, major businesses and stores opt for using peddlers as subcontractors in order to ride out fiscal crises with minimal loss. The peddlers involved in such an alliance either share the profits with businesses or are used as wholesale buyers (Yildiz, 2008). The customer-seller relationship has become an important factor in peddling. The hundreds of thousands of people working as street peddlers virtually create a new employment culture (Akgeyik, Yavuz, Ersoz, Ozdemir, & Senocak, 2004, p.50). This study utilizes qualitative methods of participant observation, semi-structured and unstructured interviews with the peddler, introducing the reader to behind the scenes. The study focuses on a single peddler, Xalo, in Istanbul, Turkey to whom I had access to, thus developing this research into a case study mapping his consumption space in terms of human interaction, space allocation and advertising practices.

Findings include fluidity of the consumption place, competitive yet cooperative behavior between sellers and lack of social performance in advertising practices. Nakanishi’s (1990) argument on segmentation based on mutually beneficial interpersonal relationships and uncompetitive markets in the informal sector finds support in this study. As Price and Arnould (1999) suggest, friendships among competitors are characterized by intimacy, loyalty and social support. As a retail service, peddling depends highly on product presentation. Without the formal marketing developments such as packaging, advertising or promotion, peddlers in the informal sector are forced to find creative solutions for presentation of products they sell through street shows (Akkubut, 2009) in Istanbul. Thus, it is possible to see peddlers who do not use performances or other means of unsophisticated advertising solutions to sell their products. Similar to the young man selling flashlight batteries in Ankara mentioned in Uysal’s (1968) research, Xalo does not use street cries or performances when he sells his products. None of the peddlers on the street use street cries, street shows or other means of social performance contrary to what Akkubut (2009) suggests. The findings support Varman and Costa (2009) that vendors do not try to steal each others’ customers by “calling out”.

As important yet neglected actors of commerce in many developing and developed countries, peddlers create an innovative and convenient new geography of consumption. Street cars that peddlers sell their products on can be thought of as a fluid yet enduring consumption space where consumers can find items of interest. In this context, space should be thought of as socially produced as Lefebvre’s space involving the production of social relations and new forms of spatialities (Mansvelt, 2005). As creators of such fluid consumption spaces, this study intended to invite the reader to take a glimpse into the life of a street vendor and introduce the reader to the behind-the-scenes of the informal market retailing and consumption.

REFERENCES


