

Reimagining Society Through Retail Practice[☆]

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Abstract

Marketing scholars with sociological and anthropological leanings have made great strides in uncovering strategic and theoretical implications of consumer collectives and consumption-driven market phenomena. It has not been very common that their perspectives have been brought to bear on retailing practice or theory. This ethnographic study examines a highly successful, globalizing, consumer-driven pop-up retail festival for its potential lessons about social movements. It reveals new insights into logics and potentialities for retailing as a field of affordances for reimagining society and social practices. It points especially to how eruptions of ‘carnavalesque mood’ unite everyday citizens to imagine change in a highly regulated social context and how they utilize the practice of retailing collectively to actualize societal change.

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It’s for one day. The point is that everybody gets involved, not asking anyone what we are supposed to do [...] It’s making some kind of a difference [...] It’s a kind of a movement.

(Restaurant Day participant, Helsinki)

Introduction

The opening quote, from a young woman and restaurateur for a day, refers to Restaurant Day, a consumer-driven, global

pop-up restaurant festivity with a genesis in Helsinki, Finland. During Restaurant Day (RD), ordinary citizens create one-day restaurants in places such as homes, parks and street corners. They plan menus and themes, set prices, make and serve food, and do it largely with no intention of making a profit, and with little regard toward appropriate legislation. As a retailing case study RD can only offer indirect strategy insights or best practices. It would even seem that when RD participants do something ‘right’ in retailing terms, it is not for purposes of conducting business activities. However, what our study of RD does reveal about retailing is much more consequential. It reveals retailing to be more than a branch or a function of marketing. What we will find is that retailing, as it manifests in contexts such as RD, enables forms of social movements that can turn the status quo of city life on its head (see Kozinets and Handelman 2004). It would even seem that for people wishing to break out of routines or to reimagine possibilities for urban life, retailing provides a fitting language and logic for doing so.

We will show that Restaurant Day has already left permanent impressions on the city-space of Helsinki and its dwellers, shifting legislative attitudes toward retailing practices while awakening citizens to alternative ways of existing in the marketplace. We will present evidence that these changes have occurred through playful inversions of established public policies and subordinations of prevailing retailing principles (see Bradford and Sherry 2015; Kozinets and Handelman 2004). We will show that retailing in this form is an eruption of *carnavalesque mood*

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(Bakhtin 1984; Heidegger 1995), a shared ethos that makes such inversions and subordinations possible by sensitizing people to the status quo and how it could be transformed.

In line with a long history of literature in retailing that focuses on salient aspects of shopping experience (e.g., Martineau 1958; Tauber 1972; also Miller 2001; Miller et al. 1998), Restaurant Day as a social phenomenon enacted through retail raises the question: When retailing isn't primarily about profit or the distribution of products, how does it manifest and what social purposes does it serve? With this question in mind, we explore retailing in the hands of consumers who are yearning for difference and perhaps for change in the bureaucratic order of day-to-day life. Following retailing scholars who have foregrounded the experiential (e.g., Borghini et al. 2009; Bradford and Sherry 2015; Dobscha and Foxman 2012; Kozinets et al. 2004), we highlight the participatory, agentic and spatially appropriative ways in which RD retailing practices produce sociality and city-spaces. These periodic social gatherings are constituted in a carnivalesque mood, an affective backdrop that opens up to consumers a new field of affordances through which to reimagine and recreate the prevailing order of technocratic and individuating retail spaces. To get to that, we first elaborate on the history and nature of RD. Then we discuss the theoretical toolkit that emerged from our encounters with RD participants and allowed us to examine it more closely. Finally, we report findings that allow us to contribute to a conceptualization of retailing as a social force.

Restaurant Day

Restaurant Day is the world's largest food carnival organized by consumers for consumers (www.restaurantday.org). The effort to create it sprang from a general feeling of disenchantment among certain Helsinki residents with Finnish legislation governing restaurant operation.⁵ A good estimate of the legislative hurdles in Finland is provided by a recent poll where Finland was voted as the most regulated country, the ultimate 'nanny-state' of Europe,⁶ and a recent survey conducted by the Finnish Business and Policy Forum indicates that six out of ten Finns view the state as being overtly regulative.⁷ This state of affairs has also spurred a great deal of criticism, especially on part of young Finns being increasingly active on social media. One such burgeoning site is 'The Bureaucrat of the Day', an online news site and forum where issues of social policies and regulation are actively debated.⁸

Breaking from this backdrop, in May 2011, the founding members of RD initiated the event as a protest. Their idea was to organize a happening in which participants would exercise civil disobedience by opening pop-up restaurants for a single day without complying with the associated legislative hurdles

regarding commercial food services or the commercial uses of public space. This social movement has since grown into a full-blown food carnival for anyone and everyone. Its festive features overlay and in many cases overshadow the original tones of civil resistance and temporary liberation from dominant power structures (see Bradford and Sherry 2015; Kozinets and Handelman 2004), and yet it has become arguably universal in its appeal. In the words of one young male participant in several RD events:

What I think is great is that the core group were, to put it crudely, these kind of urban hipsters that can't readily relate to small town people but for some reason the event still has spread to these small towns. It has somehow crossed these invisible boundaries whether we are in a city or in the countryside, Finland or abroad [. . .] It's not a university students' thing or an event for a particular group but rather it's kind of boundary spanning. It's part of the fun.

For the inaugural RD, participating consumer-restaurateurs signed up for the event by e-mail. The e-addresses were then compiled into a single file and circulated on the Internet. A total of 45 restaurants in 13 different Finnish cities resulted. Since its inception, RD has grown exponentially. Fig. 1 summarizes key statistics on the growing popularity of RD with regards to the number of restaurants partaking in the event and the geographic breadth of cities and countries that held RD restaurants during each event. By the May 2015 event, a total of 2,497 pop-up restaurants had signed up through a dedicated webpage or mobile application. RD expanded swiftly beyond the borders of Finland. In May 2015, 34 different countries had pop-up restaurants. RD has become the world's largest food event, having taken place in at least 71 countries, with over 20,000 individual pop-up restaurants and an estimated 2.3 million meals served (www.restaurantday.org).

The event has also received considerable attention and praise from the press and the public sector. It has won numerous awards such as the prestigious Finland Award from the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture in 2011 and the Food Event of the Year award in Denmark in 2013. It gathered media attention through a dedicated talk in TEDx Turku in December 2013,⁹ and it was mentioned in *The Economist* (2013) as one form of the cultural revolution of the Nordic countries. On the grassroots level it has gathered a host of followers with 68,884 people having liked its Facebook page as of the 15th of August 2015. With its increasing popularity RD has largely outgrown the critical protest purpose with which it was launched, and which we will discuss farther down.

RD has also had a lasting impact on the Helsinki restaurant scene. It has led to the loosening of regulations for opening up a pop-up restaurant that are now exempt from the necessity to report their activities to the food safety authorities.¹⁰ This has substantially lowered the barrier for opening up pop-up

⁵ Timo Santala, TEDTalks, TEDxTurku 4th of December 2013, retrieved online 21.12.2013.

⁶ <http://nannystateindex.org>, retrieved 5.4.2016.

⁷ http://yle.fi/uutiset/evan_kyselyyn_vastanneet-suomi_on_holhousvaltio/6339489, retrieved 5.4.2016.

⁸ <http://paivanbyrokraatti.com>, retrieved 5.4.2016.

⁹ Timo Santala, TEDTalks, TEDxTurku 4th of December 2013, retrieved online 21.12.2013.

¹⁰ <http://www.evira.fi/portaal/fi/elintarvikkeet/valmistus+ja+myynti/elintarvikehuoneistot+/usein+kysyttya/>.

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