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Unpacking producer/ consumer relationships in ethical markets: a look at Portland's DIY sector

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Research Summary

Research objectives

- Evaluates an ethical market as an alternative to mass production to identify indicators, assess effectiveness & unpack relationships.
- Reviews Portland's artisan economy with a focus on the do-it-yourself (DIY, indie) craft sector to assess the role of place & space.

Research questions

1. How do we track the spaces & relations of ethical markets?
2. What are the implications and indicators of DIY market participation?

Methods, Findings, Review

Background Discussions

Ethical consumerism

- **Origins**: Global South production/ Global North consumption (Gavin Fridell).
- **Evolution**: Includes Global South consumption/ Global North production.

Political consumerism

- **Definitions**: boycott, boycott, determining effectiveness (Michele Micheletti).
- **Structural impacts**: unreflexive localism & commodity fetishism (Melanie Dupuis & David Goodman, Jose Johnston et al;).

Artisan economy (Charles Heying)

- **Production**: alternative to fordism & mass production; head, heart, hands.
- **Incentive**: against big box stores, unfettered free markets, craft/integrity of work.

Relevant fields: urban studies, urban geography, consumer studies, cultural studies.

Relevant concepts: place, space, networks; DIY ethic (Manuel Castells; Amy Spencer).

Methods

Secondary

- Literature & Internet review to identify DIY artisans & venues.
- Internet review of online local crafter websites, blogs, etc;.

Field Research & Interviews

- Field research: participatory observations at 15 large artisan events, 20 retail shops & small venues.
- Formal interviews: local leaders of DIY community.
- Informal interviews with local artisans.

Findings: Sector Profile

Characteristics of products

- Materials are often partly local, sustainable, reused or fairly produced.
- Products are handmade, anti-modern & reveal production processes.

Indicators of Portland DIY craft markets as ethical

- Access is low entry; can be skilled, but is not exclusive or high brow art.
- Knowledge is readily available, actively shared, & free or affordable.
- Values & identities drive participation.

Findings: Drivers of Portland DIY

Values among market participants

- Ethics: artisan, localist, sustainable, communitarian, natural, fair trade.
- Market process: integrity of production & consumption.
- Communitarian: noncompetitive & accountable production.
- Resistance: some perception of soft resistance through participation.

Local participation

- Culture: independent, support for community, artisan & local markets
- Neighborhoods: artsy enclaves & neo-bohemian districts.

Findings: Role of Place & Networks

Place-based characteristics to support effectiveness

- Civic policies: government advocacy, street fairs, markets, creative space.
- Critical regulations: flexible licenses for temporary use of space.
- Cost of living: affordable rents & retail allows home workspaces.
- Access: to alternative markets (producers & consumers).

(Local) Networks to support effectiveness

- Artisan leadership & support: persists via formal & informal networks.
- Infrastructure: sector leaders foster & promote DIY markets.
- Collaboration: with other artisan sectors and creative industries.
- Institutions: nonprofit & education support; creative industries spillover.

Findings: Role of Virtual Space

Market promotion

- Enables online marketplace participation.
- Promotes artisans: exposes production process & profiles artisans.

Community promotion

- Fosters informational networks for DIY producers.
- Connects to external markets, networks & communities.
- Provides social interactions in flexible home workplaces.

Threats & Risks

Threats to DIY survival

- Corporate competition: mass production low costs; co-opt designs; outsource.
- Saturation: creates competition.
- Economy & jobs: Can DIY survive?



Risks of DIY practice

- Contrasting values: local, sustainable, fair trade, organic.
- Unreflexive localism: parochialism when local isn't better.
- Localvore myths: not always local- supply chains, production.

Critiques/ Questions

- Access for whom?
- Civic support for whom? Who decides policies?
- What about structural change? Why no revolution?
- What about all those threats & risks?
- Are DIY artisans self-exploiting?
- Why Portland? Why craft?
- Can this model be replicated outside Portland?

Conclusions

Communitarian values & production ethics support Portland's DIY market, but offer insufficient protection from vulnerability to market pressures.

Indicators of DIY as an alternative market

- Place & space enable market opportunities (civic, not MNC/state power).
- Values drive participation. Process is exposed (at last stage of production).
- Local, virtual & non-local networks provide support.
- Leadership promotes market opportunities.

Future implications of DIY as an alternative market

- Major threats & risks exist outside & within DIY market sector.
- The market is (debatably) alternative, but larger impacts are unclear.

Significance & Future Research

Significance

- Identifies characteristics & indicators of ethical markets & participation.
- Examines impacts & limits of ethical markets.
- Furthers early evaluations of market alternatives to mass production.

Future studies

- Identify characteristics of successful alternative markets.
- Evaluate alternative markets in the context of risks & threats.
- Consider implications for civic policy advocacy (ie; public procurement).
- Investigate economic & social impacts & limits of ethical markets.

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Brew to Bikes: Portland's Artisan Economy,
by Charles Heying,
Portland: Ooligan Press, 2010