Flea Markets
Joel Stillerman

Grand Valley State University, US

Flea markets are open air or semi-enclosed markets featuring used, antique, and new goods. Vendors make cash sales at simply decorated stalls. Markets offer vendors economic opportunities; vendors vary in skills; and sellers and buyers enjoy haggling, market environments, and socializing. Flea markets’ unique qualities provide an antidote to sterile retail formats.

Keywords: consumption; cultural diversity; economic sociology; leisure and recreation; poverty

Flea markets are open air or semi-enclosed markets featuring used, antique, or new goods and including stalls housing individual merchants. They diverge from standard retail formats because they feature independent vendors, include new and used goods, rely on cash transactions, have a nonstandardized visual presentation, and governments weakly monitor sales and tax compliance. The Paris Flea Market of the 1870s was the first flea market (Miller 1988). Researchers agree that flea markets fill a gap in retailing, though they diverge in their foci on entrepreneurial opportunities for vendors, vendors’ sale strategies and motivations, and shoppers’ experiences.

Flea markets offer income earning or investment opportunities to low-income individuals, members of immigrant ethnic communities with little access to formal employment or employed individuals seeking supplementary income. Low-income vendors include downwardly mobile professionals, immigrants whose legal status or language skills limit their access to formal employment, or members of ethnic minorities facing labor market discrimination. Employed vendors view sales as either a hobby or a profession; those in the latter group search for items via newspapers, catalogs, estate sales, yard sales, and wholesalers (Barros Nock 2009; Maisel 1974).
Novice and veteran vendors differ in sales strategies. Novices liquidate assets due to economic misfortune; veterans source goods through various channels and store merchandise in garages or warehouses. Veterans may “trick” novices by buying their merchandise “for a song” and reselling it for a profit. Experienced dealers develop detailed knowledge of prices, features of goods, and effective sales strategies (Sherry 1990; Maisel 1974).

Shoppers and vendors haggle over prices, feigning ignorance or knowledge of a good’s “true” value to gain economic advantage or simply to enjoy this ritualized encounter. Vendors engage in “lateral cycling” of used goods or hard-to-sell new products, thereby shifting their status from “trash” to “treasure” if purchasers appreciate their “uniqueness.” Vendors seek sociability, freedom, and autonomy through entrepreneurship. Shoppers appreciate markets’ carnivalesque atmosphere, the “thrill of the hunt,” and socializing at markets (Maisel 1974; Sherry 1990; Gregson and Crewe 2003).

Flea markets are in-between or “liminal” spaces because they feature new and used goods, are formal businesses relying on cash sales, and include “role fluidity”: vendors and shoppers each make purchases for resale. Because of their liminal status, recreational features, appealing rituals, and economic advantages, these markets “humanize” the retail experience, in contrast to sterile, standardized retail formats (Sherry 1990; Barros Nock 2009).

SEE ALSO: Consumption Rituals; Economy, Informal; Homogenization and Heterogenization; Recycling; Waste

References