


Chapter 12

Food Retail in the Rural Periphery Using the Example of Germany: Identifying Success Factors

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ABSTRACT

Using a mixed-method approach, the author documents processes of decline in food retail on the spatial meso-scale of a northern German federal state and investigates the attitudes and patterns of demand of households dealing with the loss of local retail. Cluster and discriminant analysis are used to identify five relevant sub-groups, all of which are characterised by an ongoing discourse concerning the local retail structures. The five sub-groups define their (dis)interest in local retail using very different spatial, temporal, and substantial criteria. These criteria are drawn upon by local retailers to develop strength and weakness profiles and identify learning potential in an attempt to use innovative forms of niche marketing to better attract non-users or minimal users. Expert interviews with village shopkeepers and local producers of fresh goods indicate which solutions are being implemented to secure the commercial success of rural local retail in the long term and to distinguish such retail from the offerings of ubiquitous chains of supermarkets and discounters.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, it is possible to observe that the spatial distribution of food retail formats is becoming increasingly unequal in terms of sales area, quantitative range and quality of goods. This has led to the development of a multidisciplinary discourse on the emergence and consequences of food deserts, which involve the depletion of food supply structures and create disadvantaged population groups. The following paper builds on and reinterprets this approach, presenting food deserts not only as real and reified spaces with retail locations and patterns of distribution, but (also) as the result of mental structures and basic beliefs that contribute towards diverse retail formats being favoured or, indeed, certain formats being avoided even if they are the last local source of retail supply. The research is based on qualitative and quantitative empirical investigations in rural regions of the state of Schleswig-Holstein (Germany) which include residential households and shopkeepers. It is demonstrated that several of the village shops and local producers are focusing on the concept of a food oasis of 'fresh' products and are confirmed in this by selected customer clientele, rather than food deserts developing in this situation. Other consumers re-interpret local retail, looking beyond their place of residence and failing to use local supply structures to an extent that would enable local shops to survive as viable businesses. The aim here is to use psychographic segmentation to achieve a more complex picture of the preconditioning of customers towards retail formats than is possible using only traditional socio-demographic filters. From this, strengths and weaknesses in the learning and adaptation processes of local retailers are derived in an attempt to change the consolidated attitudes of their (non-)customers in the long-term.

BACKGROUND AND AIMS

Since the 1990s there has been a clear increase in research interest in the spatial inequality of food supplies and food retail formats, right down to the micro- and meso-scales. In the 1970s and 1980s the discussion focused rather on food insecurity, hunger, production, growth in the world's population and declining natural resources, a discussion that adopted a global perspective and was primarily anchored in the global South (Maxwell, 1996). In contrast, in the global North and its so-called developed industrial and service societies, attention is increasingly directed towards country-wide, comprehensive, 'fair' and alternative supplies of food on the local scale (Wrigley, 2002; Bitto, Morton, Oakland, & Sand, 2003). In recent decades innovative retail formats like supermarkets, discounters, self-service department stores and shopping centres have spread globally (Reardon, Timmer, Barrett, &

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