

An Ethnomethodological View of Bargain Shopping in Greenhills Tiangge

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ABSTRACT

This is an observational study on culture and consumer behavior in a tiangge. It looked at shopping norms and practices constituting bargain shopping as a socially-organized activity. Using ethnomethodology as lens for investigating everyday, practical activities, this study examined the membership, talk, and conduct of shoppers in Greenhills tiangge. Participant observation was used to explicate various aspects of the phenomenon under study. Findings revealed that bargain shopping appealed to a wide range of consumers regardless of age, gender, and socio-economic class. It consisted of a set of procedures from product search to inquiry, seeking out and later evaluating alternatives, haggling, and finally purchase. The informal nature of tiangge shopping cultivated a relaxed environment for more personal, one-on-one interactions between vendors and buyers. Talk was generally light and cordial with the vendor engaging in the interaction more than the buyer. Bargain shopping was primarily constituted as a leisurely social activity, one that necessitated time and effective communication skills and was best suited for people in high-context cultures, such as the Philippines.

Keywords: culture, consumer behavior, haggling, ethnomethodology

INTRODUCTION

As people interact, culture is produced and reproduced. Culture permeates all social activities. It sets the context for interaction, links individuals to one another, and guides human action. One social activity that Filipinos are known for is shopping. In fact, a big trend in retail these days is *tiangge* shopping. In today's dwindling economy, consumers look to cheaper and budget-friendly product alternatives that would still afford them the best deals at bargain prices. Filipinos are no strangers to this practice. The concept of *tawad* which, if translated, means that haggling has long been embedded in the Filipinos' consumer culture. Haggling involves a back-and-forth exchange between buyer and seller in negotiating terms of sale for an item usually done in informal market environments.

According to the 2009 Taylor Nelson Sofres (TNS) household purchase panel data, cost remains to be an important factor to Filipino shoppers, with 92 percent planning their shopping in advance. People now "look for cheaper options and prioritize buying the basics with 73 percent allotting time to look for the best promotions," the report stated. TNS data further indicate that sachets and break bulks or *tingi* buying continue to be popular among Filipino consumers specially the lower-income groups (D and E classes), which account for 90 percent of the total households surveyed ("Shopping Styles," 2009).

Origins and Evolution of Tiangge

The informal market environment in the Philippines has since evolved from the modest *bangketa* to present-day *tiangge* malls and weekend markets permeating highly-urbanized cities. The "Filipino word *tiangge*, which means 'market,' has its origins in the Nahuatl word "tianguiztli," a language from the Aztec empire which means day market or



Typical accessories display in tiangges

harvest ("Green Means Go," 2010). It is a term used to describe open-air marketplace or bazaar in Mexico and other Central American countries. The tradition which dates back to the pre-Hispanic period continues to this day and remains a strong facet of Mexican culture. This form of commerce has since found its way in the Philippines. These days, key cities and provinces alike are teeming with *ukay-ukay*, bazaars, and *tiangge* enticing consumers with affordable and cut-price goods ranging from overruns, surplus, second-hand apparel, knock-off shoes, bags, accessories, housewares, and even food products. Shoppers flock to these establishments all year-round especially during peak seasons, i.e., June's school opening and December's holiday shopping.

The perceived value for money and preference for easy-on the pocket buying makes destinations like *tiangge* an ideal place for shopping. Bargain shopping as a social activity is a potential area of study as this reflects the emerging culture of consumption of Filipinos today. Conducting a study on the Filipinos' bargain shopping culture would help in addressing the dearth in extant research on the subject. Consumer behavior has been studied by marketers and consumer researchers over the years. Luna and Gupta (2001) assert the link between culture and consumer behavior stating that an individual's consumption behavior can be inculcated as part of the group's culture. "It is through the passing on of culture that these learned behavior patterns are said to permeate an individual's day-to-day interpersonal experiences and therefore, by necessity, affect his behavior as a consumer" (Henry, 1976).

Consumers are drawn to bargains for reasons other than economics, chief of which is that people feel a sense of accomplishment from acquiring low-priced items (Pooler, 2003).

Pooler (2003) adds that more than saving a few bucks, it is the feeling of "beating the odds", triumphing over retailers, similar to what one feels in gambling that motivates bargain shoppers. Bargain hunting is also about the thrill of the encounter and having to share the lived experience with a friend or a loved one. According to Pooler (2003), bargain hunting is one of the main reasons why people shop and marketers and advertisers take advantage of this fact by coming up with retail strategies to lure consumers.

In many countries, pricing strategies are used as a pretext for offering bargains wherein retail prices are set high to make room for discounts. This leads shoppers to believe that they have indeed scored a bargain even if they have not (Burton, 2009). In a 2004 study done by Sternquist, Byun, and Jin on price perception between Koreans and Chinese, it was revealed that Chinese consumers are generally frugal and tend to be less prestige-conscious as compared to Korean consumers, adding that the Chinese tradition of haggling can be related to this perceived value for price consciousness (Burton, 2009).

A salient feature of bargain shopping is haggling. Hendon et al. (1996) define haggling as “a highly-structured behavioral system marked with verbal threats, counter-threats, disclaimers of interest, and sign language” in an attempt to come to terms. It is a time consuming social activity that requires a certain set of values, motivations, attitudes, and know-how for it to be pursued effectively. Since it requires time, haggling is more likely to occur in polychronic cultures (Hendon et al., 1996). “Polychronic culture takes a more leisurely view of time. Time moves in greater and lesser cycles, independent of human wants” (Cohen, 1991). Building relationships is another important aspect of haggling, a characteristic typical in collectivist cultures. Thus, haggling is mostly practiced in high-context cultures where personal relationships and greater latitude for time are likely observed. Hendon et al. (1996) cite the Middle East, Africa, and developing countries in Asia Pacific and Latin America as places where haggling is considered a common practice.

Almost all literature used for this study are from the West. Interestingly enough, there is a seeming lack of documentation on this shopping behavior from Asians. This study hopes to add an Asian perspective to existing research on the Filipino culture of bargain shopping.

Objectives

This study attempted to provide a descriptive account of the practices and behaviors of shoppers in Greenhills *tiangge*. Specifically, it is motivated by the following questions:

- 1) What is the membership (general profile) of shoppers in Greenhills *Tiangge*?

- 2) What are the observable practices in talk (verbal behaviors) and conduct (physical behavior) that constitute bargain shopping in Greenhills *Tiangge* as a socially-organized activity?

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

This study adopts an ethnomethodological approach in looking at bargain shopping as a commonplace organized activity that is constituted by norms and practices, rules, and processes that are manifested through the observable patterns of behaviors of consumers in a *tiangge*. Littlejohn and Foss (2008) defined ethnomethodology (EM) as the “careful observation of microbehaviors in real situations.” One of its early proponents, sociologist Harold Garfinkel, described it as referring to the “procedures (rules and activities) that people employ in making social life and society intelligible and understandable to themselves” (Zanden, 1984). According to Zanden (1984), central to the conduct of ethnomethodology is examining the commonplace activities of people, how they do what they do and in the process ascribe meaning and order to their social lives. Ethnomethodology then is concerned with the procedures by which social order is produced and shared.

Coulon (1995) explains some key ideas on ethnomethodology. Ethnomethodology focuses on the practices that produce the social activity. It analyzes behaviors as the necessary constituents of any socially-organized conduct. It also looks at indexicality which points to how social life is constituted through language: words are context-based and can only assume their full meaning within the context in which they are produced. Another way of studying social activities through this lens is by examining how each action is sequentially related to the other, and the practices exchanged through which activities are produced.

Accordingly, careful examination of the accomplishment of activities can unravel the practices and methods through which particular events are constituted and socially-organized.



Figure 6.1. Talk-conduct relationship in bargain shopping

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Using the concepts of EM, bargain shopping as a social activity can best be studied by observing the interplay (sequentiality) of talk (indexicality) and conduct (practice) among members in a given activity.

Specifically, talk looks at the turns at talk, overheard interactions between shoppers and vendors. What kind of information or script was typically exchanged? Who speaks to whom? Who initiates the interaction? What is the tone of voice?

Conduct, on the other hand, refers to practice or physical and nonverbal behaviors like the shoppers' use of body movements, gesticulation, eye contact, and space. Moreover, it looks at human traffic or the distribution of shoppers in the *tiangge* as well as the period wherein there is heaviest foot traffic in the area.

METHODOLOGY

Design

One way of conducting an ethnomethodological research is through participant observation. Family Health International defines this as "a qualitative method with roots in traditional ethnographic research, whose objective is to help researchers

learn the perspectives held by study populations.” This is accomplished through “observation alone or by both observing and participating, in varying degrees a community’s daily activities.” Essentially “the researcher engaged in participant observation tries to learn what life is like for an ‘insider’ while remaining, inevitably, an ‘outsider’.”

Locale

Field observations were conducted at the Greenhills Shoppesville *Tiangge*. This shopping center is known as a shopping area where haggling is the name of the game.

Data Gathering Procedures

This involves immersing oneself in the community under study, learning their ways of being and doing, observing their patterns of engagement, and understanding the context in which they operate.

A total of 16 observation hours constitute the findings of this study. Data gathering was terminated as soon as redundancy was reached where no new behavior was observed.

Data Analysis

Field notes were used as bases for the presentation and analysis of results.

Profile of Shoppers

Consistent throughout the observation period was that most shoppers in the *tiangge* were women, although some male shoppers were noted. The shoppers’ ages range roughly from 16 to 60 years old. Majority of shoppers seem to belong in the middle class segment with a few belonging to upper-income households.



Packed shopping aisle

They were the ones often accompanied by *yayas* and other household staff.

Most shoppers were dressed in casual, laid-back clothing with a few sporting the current trends in fashion. Typical attire worn by male shoppers consisted of walking in shorts or jeans, T-shirt, and rubber shoes or slippers. Most of the female shoppers also sported jeans, short shorts, or tights/ leggings with a blouse or T-shirt for the top. They wore sandals, flip-flops, sneakers, but a few were also seen wearing high-heeled pumps and stilettos. Most of them were also seen with their bags worn across their shoulders presumably to ward off pickpockets. From what was observed, the shoppers at Greenhills *Tiangge* can be classified to belong to any of the following:

- 1) Lone shoppers – These were mostly women in their late 20s to mid-forties;
- 2) Groupies – Majority of the shoppers in Greenhills were under this category. They did “team shopping.” The average number of shoppers within a group is between two to three members. They are composed of family members, friends, and couples (husband/wife, boyfriend/girlfriend); and
- 3) Pasalubong seekers – The *tiangge* was teeming with tourists e.g., Americans, Europeans (British and others), Australians, Indians, Japanese, and Chinese. The nationalities were presumed on the basis of their language features (accents) and identifiable physical characteristics (color of their skin, eyes, hair, etc.). Balikbayans were visiting Filipinos with subtle American English accents.

Bargain Shopping Practices

Tiangge patrons, just like in any other commercial setting, follow certain codes and conventions when shopping. The following are some of the behaviors noted from the field observations:

Turns at Talk

Interactions between the shopper and the vendor were generally cordial. Though there were a few incidents observed that seemed tense particularly between an Indian shopper and a seller, “This is not gold. I’m not blind” or between a Filipino woman and the vendor, “Magkano ba kasi talaga ‘to? Sabi nyo 500. Puwede ba huwag nyo na kaming pagurin pang pumunta sa kabila. Ang dami na nga naming binili eh. (How much is this exactly? You said [it’s] PHP500. Can you not make us move to another shop? We already bought a lot from you.”)

It is the seller who frequently initiates the engagement by announcing, calling out the items for sale. This is usually punctuated with Sir or Ma’am at the end. The shopper engages the vendor by first asking, “Magkano? (How much?)” An average of six turns was observed in the early stages of a transaction (product inquiry).

Humor and some form of flirtation were observed in some interactions usually between male shoppers and female vendors. A conversation between a European male shopper and a vendor in a T-shirt store turned a bit playful when the European male asked the female vendor for the Filipino translation of the word “pretty” to which the vendor replied with a slight giggle.

Rules of Conduct

It was observed that most of the *tiangge* patrons were there to do leisure rather than utilitarian shopping as evidenced by the arbitrary nature of their store selection and their perceived lack of spatial map recognition of the area. Moreover, majority of the shoppers did not bring a list of items to purchase, with most freely hopping from stall to stall without a clear plan of which item to buy next. Only one shopper was seen pulling out a list of measurements he needed to purchase in a jeans and T-shirt store. Leisure shoppers come to the *tiangge* for the sheer pleasure of shopping, not necessarily because they have a particular item to shop for in mind.

Shoppers were moderate in their pace and did not seem all that time-conscious especially during haggling. This finding is consistent with earlier literature suggesting that *tiangge* shopping is constituted in polychronic cultures. Interested shoppers were seen establishing direct eye contact with the vendor while lurkers or those who shop to scout but not purchase would more likely look away as soon as the vendor initiated contact. It was common practice for shoppers to touch and feel the items that caught their eye. This gesture was observed most in the apparel section although there were also shoppers in the accessories, bags, and shoes sections who exhibited similar behavior. Tactile element of conduct includes touching or grasping the item or subject of interest to the shopper as a practice to test out the merchandise.

“Public” fitting of clothes in a *tiangge* is considered normal practice. Shoppers were not shy about trying on clothes sans the privacy of a formal dressing room. Male and female shoppers alike were seen trying on clothes in public, layering them on top of their clothing. Even foreigners, such as a group of young Australian men were seen doing so. Some *tiangge* stores have devised a way to give customers a semblance of privacy by covering the shopper with a piece of fabric while he or she changes. Another strategy that shoppers employ to make do with the limited privacy in *tiangges* was proxy measurement. To illustrate, in trying on a pair of pants, male shoppers were seen putting the pants’ waist ends around their necks to check if they fit, using the girth of their neck as proxy to their actual waistline measurement.

Throughout the day, the *tiangge* had a steady flow of shoppers but foot traffic was heaviest from 5PM until closing time at 8PM. There was a noted increase in the number of couples and families with children after 4PM. It was also observed that tourists more than locals stayed at the *tiangge* for longer periods of time. Shoppers were seen frequenting the middle section of the *tiangge* the most, where accessories and apparel items are commonly sold.

Procedures in Bargain Shopping

In investigating bargain shopping as a socially constituted construct, an analysis of the interplay of talk and conduct of shoppers exposes an organized set of procedures in bargain shopping as gleaned from the observed behaviors of shoppers in Greenhills *Tiangge*.

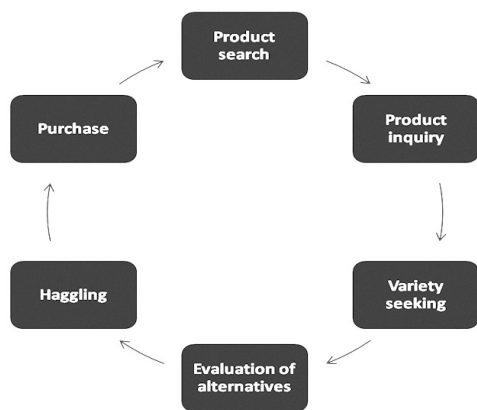


Figure 6.2 Procedures in bargain shopping

Product search

This is the act of scouting or prospecting items that a shopper intends to purchase. This involves going from stall to stall, eyeing merchandise after merchandise, stopping midway to browse, linger, touch, and feel the items until the buyer is convinced enough to move on to the next stage.

Product inquiry

This is the part where the shopper initiates contact with the seller to inquire about the price of the item that he/she is interested in. This is usually brief, lasting for only a few seconds to about a minute. It was observed that there were shoppers who silently walked away after inquiring about the price. There were also those who stayed and lingered in the store for a few more minutes, mostly to look around and check out the merchandise. Sometimes, initial bargaining would already occur at this stage.

The researcher's interaction with some sellers revealed a common script that they use to entice buyers to purchase their product. As a pre-emptive measure to shoppers' propensity for haggling, vendors called out discounts and items' "last price". This researcher's inquiry on the cost of a knock-off Chanel bag went something like this:

Buyer: Magkano po ito? (How much is this?)

Seller: 1,500 po. Pero may discount ka pa. (PHP1,500. But I'll still give you a discount.)

Buyer: Ay, masyado pong mahal. (Oh, it's too expensive)

Seller: May bawas pa yan. Sige, bigay ko sa 'yo ng 1,200. (I can still reduce the price. Okay, I'll give it at PHP1,200).

Buyer: Mahal pa rin po. Di kaya ng budget. (Still expensive. My budget won't allow.)

Seller: Sige, magkano ba ang kaya mo? (Okay, how much can you pay for it?)

Buyer: Sige po, mag-iikot muna ako. (I'll just look around.)

Variety seeking

After knowing the initial price of the item sought, interested shoppers proceed to the variety seeking phase. This is when he/she examines the merchandise up close, even asking the seller to give him/her other options. This could be anything from alternative colors, designs, sizes, etc.

Buyer: May ibang design pa ba? (Is there a different design?)

Seller: Ito po. (Here you go.)

Buyer: Titingnan ko rin sa large. (Can I see the large size?)

Seller: Ma'am, sa gray po medium na lang eh. (Ma'am, we only have the gray one in medium.)

This goes on and on until the buyer is satisfied with his/her range of choices. Normally, this involves laying out all the alternatives before the shopper so he/she can make a selection.

Evaluation of alternatives

After narrowing the buyer's range of options, he/she begins the process of contemplating on the purchase. This may involve the buyer actually testing out the merchandise. For shoes, clothes, bags, and jewelry, this means personally trying the item on, even asking the seller for a mirror so he/she can see how he/she looks like with the merchandise on. Another practice observed especially with shoppers in groups is opinion-seeking. An exchange between a girlfriend asking her boyfriend's opinion on a blouse she is eyeing to purchase went like this:

Girlfriend: Ano, maganda ba? (Is it pretty?)

Boyfriend: Huwag yan, parang pang-matanda eh. (Don't go for it, it looks something for the oldies.)

One solo shopper was also seen asking other shoppers' opinions on her intended purchase. Others even turned to the seller herself to help them evaluate their options. This stage usually takes the longest depending on the amount of information a shopper gets from his/her companions

Haggling

After determining which item to purchase, the shopper proceeds to the bargaining stage. This is when the buyer negotiates with the seller to get the price that he/she wants. Several styles of haggling or *tawad* in common parlance were observed from both local and tourist shoppers.

- Some local shoppers, particularly women, tend to be more direct in their haggling style. They insist on the price they want, at times even demanding it. Most of their statements are declarative rather than interrogatory.
- Some male shoppers were seen to be a bit more subtle in their style, their statements usually interrogatory. It was observed, however, that even if they do not get the deal that they want, they end up purchasing the item just the same.

- One haggling tactic used both by local and tourist shoppers was the promise of “bulk purchases.” A group of Australian men was overheard saying:

Buyer: You better give us a good price. See how many items we are getting.

Seller: 4,500 pesos

Buyer: No, no, that’s not good enough.

An exchange between a seller and a Filipino-Chinese family followed the same trend:

Buyer: Dapat murahan mo na yan dahil ang dami na naming binili sa iyo.

(You should give us more discounts because we already bought a lot from you.)

Seller: Hanggang 150 na lang po talaga eh. (I can only give it until 150.)

Buyer: Eh, bakit ganon? (But why?)

Seller: Konti na rin po kasi ang tubo namin eh. (Our profit is a little too small.)

Purchase

Once the buyer and seller agree on a price, the buyer secures the purchase, hands his/her payment and retrieves the change. Not one of the shoppers observed requested a receipt for their purchase. The transaction usually ends with the seller thanking the buyer for the sale.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored the Filipino culture of bargain shopping in a *tiangge* as a commonplace organized activity constituted by normative talk and conduct as revealed through its participants. Examined closely, bargain shopping carries an assembly of procedures—from product search to inquiry, seeking out and later evaluating alternatives, haggling, all the way to purchase,

that spells out the order on how shopping is typically done in a *tiangge*. Unique to this practice is the ritual of haggling or *tawad* which calls for business-like tactics either through assertive or subtle forms of price negotiation.

Bargain shopping is primarily constituted as a leisurely social activity, one that necessitates time and effective communication skills and is best suited for people in high-context cultures such as the Philippines. Findings revealed that this social activity appeals to a wide range of consumers regardless of age, gender, and socioeconomic class. The informal nature of bargain shopping cultivates a relaxed environment for more personal, one-on-one interactions between vendors and buyers. In a way, it humanizes what is typically deemed as a straightforward business transaction by affording consumers a say on how goods are priced through the art of friendly persuasion. By and large, this study hopes to shine some light on bargain shopping as inculcated in the Filipino culture of consumerism and to enrich the dearth in existing literature by adding an Asian perspective into the mix.

Future research on this phenomenon may investigate other facets of bargain shopping particularly the element of talk. An analysis on the discourse of haggling could uncover the patterns of exchanges and meanings behind the everyday words and conversations used by bargain shoppers and sellers. Another possible area for study could focus more on the social construction of these meanings i.e., how such meanings are produced, shared, and understood by participants. Using triangulation or multi-method approaches in the study e.g. exit store interview survey, focus group discussion, oral history through voice- or video-taped documentation would not only help in testing the validity of findings but may also lend more insights into the Filipino culture of bargain shopping. Continuing into the path of EM, a breaching experiment may likewise be conducted wherein instead of haggling for discount price, the shopper does the opposite and asks for a higher price. Research like this goes beyond traditional inquiry and could help tease out hidden perspectives on this phenomenon. Finally, a cross-cultural study on bargain shopping techniques may likewise be pursued given the observed influx of tourists in the Greenhills *tiangge* area.

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