Gentrification in Harlem
The adaptation and roles of local businesses

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Abstract

This study designs research to evaluate the adaptation of local business stores and roles that different types of stores play within the whole neighborhood. With the combination of both positive and reflexive science approach, this paper seeks to explore the stores and customers’ behavior and perception on gentrification. Those behavior and perception lead to the strategies that business owners adapt during gentrification. We plan to deliver three sets of survey questions to different types of businesses (i.e. owner-operated and chain stores) and customers in Central Harlem and East Harlem along 125th Street, make field notes in those two areas, check “YELP” information and do interviews with samples who fit in one of six social groups. Those six social groups are new local traditional storeowners, old traditional storeowners, new chain store workers, old chain store workers, new residential customers and old residential customers. Although the time, budget and human resources are limited, we still have to guarantee the efficient number of samples for both surveys and interview. Since we focus on specific areas in Harlem rather than the whole neighborhood over specific time period, the results might be difficult to replicate over time and space.

Background and Significance

According to The Encyclopedia of Housing (Smith 1998: 198), gentrification is defined as “the process by which central urban neighborhoods that have undergone disinvestment and economic decline experienced a reversal, reinvestment, and the in-migration of relatively well-off, middle- and upper middle-class population.” This definition brings up many questions, as follow: Do the reinvestment process on local non-chain stores? How do the residents interpret this reinvestment? Do different classes (i.e. middle class, upper middle class) have different consumption preference?

Since the late 20 century, certain types of restaurants, café’s, and stores has emerged as the visible symbols of gentrification in cities all over the world, including Harlem in New York City. Through data on changing composition of retail and services, interviews with new store owners and discursive analysis of print media,
scholars in PhD Program in Sociology examined the number of three different groups of stores: the boutiques, the corporate capital and the traditional local non-chain stores and services. Since the 1990s, both the share of boutiques and the share of large chain stores have increased, while the share of traditional local non-chain stores in Harlem has greatly declined. According to the study (Trijillo, Frase, Jackson, Recuber and Walker, 2009), “Boutiques” lead to the displacement of local retail stores and services on which long-term, lower class residents rely.

Now, we do know that reinvestment happens through the increasing number of large chain stores and boutiques and these new types of businesses displace old non-chain ones. Yet what we don’t know is what local businesses and individuals are thinking and doing. With the overwhelming reinvestment on chain stores, this study seeks to research how local non-chain stores adapt during gentrification and how those businesses play roles in the community.

**Historical Context**

Since 1905, black residents started to move in Harlem. In the 1920s, Harlem has already been a major African-American residential place. In the 1920s and 1930s, Harlem was the focus of the “Harlem Renaissance”, artists and professionals made accomplishments in the American Black Community. However, due to The Great Depression, the loss of jobs forced the poor and unemployed in the neighborhood to leave. After World War Two, the crime rates in Harlem increased rates increased rapidly.

![Graphs showing population changes in Central and Greater Harlem](source: Census data analysis by Andrew A. Beveridge, socialexplorer.com)
Since 1990s, Harlem has been experienced gentrification, because of the revival of New York City. Falling occupation made this place a great spot for investments. Middle class people started to move in for the sake of the cheap prices. Laid out in the 1811 Commissioner’s Plan for Manhattan, 125th Street runs from the Hudson to the East River, crossing West, Central and East Harlem. After the establishment of subway stop at the corner with Broadway in 1904, 125th Street is the Harlem’s central commercial corridor. Moreover, in December 2003, the Department of City Planning partnered with several city organizations, including the New York City Economic Development Corporation and the Department of Housing Preservation and Development to “sustain the ongoing revitalization of 125th Street as a unique Manhattan Main Street, enhancing its local business district character and reinforce the street’s premier arts, culture, and entertainment destination identity.” (Busà, 2014) During the reinvestment of 2000s in Harlem, local businesses were the main targets of redevelopment and revitalization. We choose 125th Street as our research space not only because of its history of “Main Street”, but also because of its rezoning policies, promoting the local businesses to operate.

Research Design
The Data for this paper is drawn from both qualitative and quantitative methods. We plan to use a variety of data sources: field notes from customer distribution toward different types of stores (new and old) taking place in East Harlem and in Central Harlem; the information on “YELP” App about customer composition; the recorded or off-recorded interviews with local traditional store owners, chain store owners, customers in Harlem and surveys on preferred store lists for residents around the Central Harlem and on West 123rd Street.

Surveys
Science Approach: Positive Science Approach
Data strategy: Cross section data strategy
Sampling strategy: Respondent-driven Strategy & Convenience Sampling Strategy
The areas we deliver the two different survey questions are East Harlem and the Central Harlem. Using the cross section data strategy, we can match people with similar characteristics into several social groups, for example local non-chain stores, chain stores, old residents and new immigrants. Also, we intend to choose interview samples from via survey data collection.

With surveys toward both local traditional businesses and chain stores, we can have a general idea on: (1) whether the stores experienced gentrification, (2) the general customer compositions in each store, and (3) whether gentrification impact businesses on product supplies, prices of products and business location. With the similar questions for both traditional businesses and chain stores that provide similar products (check out the chart below), we may figure out the customer composition and consumption preferences over similar products but different business models.
By asking questions like the ethnic group of customers, and the most frequent customers, we might obtain the ideal customer compositions from storeowners since there is a possibility of conflict as we obtain different results from observation. If the results are conflicted, there are three plausible reasons as follow: (1) the limitation of time and human resources on observation (2) the conflicts between the ideal customer compositions from owners’ perception and the realistic circumstances and (3) other possible reasons. Studying the difference between perceptions and actualities in terms of stores’ clientele is the way to interpret the storeowners or managers preferences on customers, who have different consumption choices and distinctive level of buying.
power. The preferences between storeowners and customers are interactive and independent, according to the different ways of thinking and acting.

Delivering surveys to customers, we use convenience sampling strategy and respondent-driven strategy. Instead of picking samples on streets, we aim to select our samples in different stores at different times of day/week. Since the study mainly focuses on the relationship between gentrification and adaptation and roles of local businesses in the community, the first question on whether the individual is a local resident eliminates tourists as the research samples. According to their answers on their consumption of entertainment and the amount of taxes they paid for one year, we are able to assess their level of buying power. With the further list of store names, we are able to match the stores with different groups of people— those two groups of people either buy the same sets of products or buy different sets of products at all. By studying those two social groups, we are capable of relating social groups to consumption choices and cultural differences.

The sample survey questions for local non-chain storeowners are as follow:

1. How long have you run your business/store?
2. Who are your customers?
3. Are most of your customers local residents or not?
4. Do you know most of your customers well?
5. Have you changed your menus/goods to offer since you first run your business? If yes, please give out the example
6. Have you changed your price since you first run your business? If yes, in what extent?
7. Have you changed your business location since you started your business?
8. Do your customers change a lot during these years?
9. Could you please point out customers in your store right now who came here most frequently

The sample survey questions for chain store workers/managers are as follow:
1. How long have this store opened?
2. Why did you choose to work here?
3. Who are your customers?
4. Are most of your customers local residents or not?
5. Do you know most of your customers well?
6. Does this store attract more customers than other stores in the chain?

The sample survey questions for customers are as follow:
1. Are you a local resident?
2. How long have you been lived here?
3. How many times on average do you go to theaters/cinemas per month? How many times do you eat out?
4. (Optional) How much taxes did you pay last year?
5. Are you satisfied with your current life?
6. Could you please name five stores that you go frequently (food stores, clothes, etc)

Fieldwork

Science Approach: Positive Science Approach

Sampling strategy: Purposive Sampling

One part of the fieldwork is the observation over both local tradition stores and chain stores. Via the observation of “dry facts” without any ethnological methods, we manage to record customer compositions multiple times per day/week. Back to the survey question of owners’ perception on customer compositions, if the results are conflicted, there are three possible causes that mention in “Survey” part.

Another part of field work is the record of price setting among stores provide similar sets of products, for example, building materials, clothing and accessories, electrical and appliances, food and beverage, etc. The price difference of similar products in local non-chain stores and chain stores leads to one possible business strategy for local non-chain businesses to adapt. Quoting from the founder of Women
in Black, who is also a merchant in East Harlem for decades, “small local businesses cannot compete with chain stores, but we have good customer service and unique products. We do not compete with chain stores, instead, we get away from them.” Price points for the similar products at chain and non-chain stores may indicate stores’ strategies of survival.

On the other hand, according to the demographic map above, the median sale price over median household income ratio along West 125th Street is much more higher than that of East 125th Street. This leads to two possible factors: (1) the average sale price in Central Harlem is higher than that in East Harlem, and (2) the income level difference in Central and East Harlem, leading to different buying power. The average sale price difference of similar products in Harlem results in the plausible interpretation of relationship between gentrification and roles of local businesses. The sales prices of similar products in different areas symbolize the local residents’ living standards and their perception of local stores. Plus, their views of stores and their role in gentrification might affect their shopping behaviors.

The third part of fieldwork is the observation of advertisement on products for both local traditional stores and chain businesses. Advertisement is the direct indication of business competitions. The different advertisement especially from
chain stores to non-chain stores may manifest their different adaptation strategies to survive after gentrification.

“YELP” APP

Science Approach: Positive Science Approach

Sampling strategy: Purposive Sampling

By using the “YELP” APP or website, we are able to find stores and services on records with ranking-based data, comments from customers, the customers’ background, and the price range for almost all stores and services in Central and East Harlem. Rather than selecting people from specific time periods, “YELP” emerges customers’ perception of businesses, including price setting, customer services, and quality of products over large time period. According to the comments and ranking (with total 5 stars assessment) based on long-term collection, the difference of those characteristics shows different strategies for businesses to survive. Moreover, those customers who write comments on “YELP” are more likely to affect other customers’ shopping behavior.

Interviews:

Science Approach: Reflexive Science Approach

Sampling strategy: Respondent-driven Strategy

In order to further study the perception and behavior of storeowners and customers, interview is one of the main methods throughout our research proposal. From the data collection via surveys, we have six categories: (1) old local traditional stores, (2) new local traditional stores, (3) old chain stores, (4) new chain stores, (5) individuals with less buying power and (6) individuals with higher buying power. We plan to select at least 3-4 interviewees from each category because the cultural differences impact dramatically on the perception and behavior of individuals.

Doing interviews with non-chain store owners and chain store owners directly captures stores’ actual behaviors on economic scales (i.e. business strategies) and their perception on cultural differences that impact on their businesses. On the other
hand, the interviews with customers intend to obtain the reasons for different shopping behaviors and how their views on stores and their role in gentrification might affect their behaviors.

1. The sample Interview questions for local traditional store owners:
   1. How did you start your business? How about your life at that time?
   2. Have you ever extended your stores? Why?
   3. How did your customer change for the past years? How did they change since you started your business?
   4. Are there still any familiar customers?
   5. Did you change your menu/add new products? Why?
   6. You wrote in the survey that you have (not) changed your products to sell, why is that?
   7. Which product is the best seller? What kinds of people prefer them most?
   8. You wrote in the survey that you have (not) changed the prices, why is that?
   9. You wrote in the survey that you have (not) changed the business location, why is that?
  10. How do you promote the advertisement of your business?
  11. Is it difficult to run your store here? Why?
  12. Have you ever thought to move away? Why?

The sample interview questions for chain stores:
  1. Why do you choose here as your business location?
  2. Do different ethnic group have different consumption preferences?
  3. Do you have specific promotion of advertisement of your products for the customers in your area?
  4. Do you believe the consumption power of chain stores is bigger than that of local business? Why?
  5. How is the rent of this area? Compare to the stores in other chain

The sample Interview questions for customers:
  1. How long have you lived here?
2. Have you been experienced gentrification?
3. Why do you move here after gentrification? How about your past life?
4. Is your living cost increasing?
5. Are you lacking of something?
6. How do you think that your surroundings should be changed?

**Conclusion and Discussion**

Before our second fieldwork to Harlem, we intend to categorize the sampling into four groups: new businesses owners, old business owners, new residents and old residents. However, as we tried to really speak up and deliver the survey papers, we realized how impractical it is. You cannot go straight inside the business and start your standard questions for both local traditional stores and chain stores. The shop assistants in those chain stores are less likely to answer questions like whether the prices have changed and for what reasons. Then, we design another sets of survey and interview question only for chain store workers. Plus, we changed our samples from residents to direct customers. Watching people walk on the street, especially in Central Harlem, we found out how ideal it is to stop any pedestrian to fill in a survey for us. Instead, we manage to get answers from customers who were shopping. Asking them questions in the semi-public stores with air conditioners and no people starred around is much better than asking anyone in the middle of hurry.

Due to the limitation of the time, budget and human resources, we have to make trade off on the sampling strategies. Yet, we still need to guarantee the number of our samples. Choosing at least 2 people in each six category is the bottom line. Rather than distrusting people with their oral history, people with different cultural background may perceive same topic with dramatically huge difference. During our interview with a Black book stall owner, Willie Johnson, he expressed his own emotional perception of gentrification in Harlem as “the process of kicking Black people out” with increasingly high rent rate and record restriction. He introduced how Black people were arrested on records and then being kicked off from hosing projects. Doing interview with more than one person is the way to avoid extreme perspectives
and to obtain more representative and generalized results. Since we focus on specific
areas in Harlem rather than the whole neighborhood over specific time period, the
results might be difficult to replicate over time and space.
Reference

