

TRANSFORMATION OF THE SELF AND OTHERS IN THE AGE OF RAPID URBANIZATION – TALES OF VIETNAMESE HOME GARDENERS

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ABSTRACT

Motivated by food safety concerns, some urban consumers in Hanoi, Vietnam, started home gardening using available resources. Although constrained by physical ability, space and experience, home gardeners nonetheless pursue their goals and, in the process, discover multiple transformative benefits of home gardening. Not only do home gardeners transform themselves physiologically, psychologically, emotionally and cognitively, they also transform surrounding spaces and communities.

Keywords: transformation, home gardening, food safety, urbanization

INTRODUCTION

Economic prosperity has taken center stage in developing countries as a sign that these countries are not only catching up with the western world but also growing fast as the locomotives of world economic growth. However, such prosperity has taken its tolls on the environment as well as societal well-being. The research reported here was inspired by home gardening, a recent movement among urban dwellers in Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam, to transform small residential and communal spaces into home gardens as a way to protect themselves and their families from the growing use of unregulated pesticides and fertilizers, which has been identified as a strong correlate with an increasing number of cancers and other health issues in Vietnam. Our study shows that besides physiological and economic impacts, home gardening also brings about desirable emotional and psychological effects on consumers through transformation of self and others.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Home Gardening

Researchers from various disciplines have studied the impacts of and motivations for home gardening. In the United States, “war gardens” in World War I and “victory gardens” in World War II allowed the diversion of nearly one-third of US commercially grown food to the war effort as well as the diversion of substantial metal inventory because of the reduced demand for commercial canning [6] [9].

In recent years, the increasing efficiency of market/truck farming and the time/space limitations of urban families have made home gardening in the US increasingly unnecessary or unattainable in the urban landscape [1] [5]. Geography and spatial location are related to the likelihood in the occurrence of gardening. Less gardening is expected in urban areas, accompanied by greater reliance on commercial market to meet food needs [12]. However, some studies have found that home gardening has been pursued in response to hardship or economic necessity [4] as an adaptive strategy [12]. Additionally, home gardens can also enable people to psychologically escape the hectic urban life for a few moments each day [15].

So far Vietnam has largely been known to the world as a war in which the United States was defeated. However, since the implementation of *Doi Moi* (economic renovation), Vietnam has recorded impressive economic growth, averaging an annual rate of 8% between 2003 and 2007, 6% between 2008 and 2010, and 6% between 2013 and 2015 [4], transforming itself from one of the poorest countries in the world to one of the most dynamic emerging economies. Nevertheless, such impressive growth has come at a cost. Air and water pollution in Vietnam has exceeded alarming levels [10], food poisonings are rampant, and the number of cancer cases has spiked in recent years. To make matters worse, a weak legislative framework and severe lack of resources for implementation and enforcement of (already ineffective) laws and regulations has resulted in such issues spinning out of control. Faced with daily reports in the media of the acute food safety crisis, some Vietnamese consumers have sought ways to protect themselves and loved ones through securing vegetable supply using available resources, such as home gardening.

Transformative Consumer Research

Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) has recently emerged as a movement among consumer researchers focusing on research that benefits consumer welfare and quality of life for all beings engaged in or affected by consumption across the world [8]. Among the core objectives of TCR are to improve consumer well-being, to highlight sociocultural and situational contexts, and to disseminate findings to relevant stakeholders [7].

Our study was initially motivated by the intriguing appearance of home gardens on balconies and terraces and in Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam, where population density rivals those of the world's most populous capitals at 5,873 people per square mile [16]. In the course of data collection and analysis, interesting themes started to emerge which not only fit well with the home gardening literature but also complement the burgeoning TCR literature.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Following the Grounded Theory approach [14], 37 in-depth interviews were conducted between December 2015 and August 2017. Respondents were contacted either through cold calling or snowballing using personal referrals either off-line or through Facebook postings. These interviews lasted between 30 minutes to two and a half hours and were transcribed into textual data which were used for analysis in combination with field notes

and photographs. The majority of respondents are the elderly (older than 65 years of age) with a few exceptions of younger home gardeners. This is not surprising as many Vietnamese elderly parents live in the same household with their adult children and grandchildren and have more idle time. Data collection ended upon saturation, meaning when there were no new themes emerging from the newly collected data [14].

An initial subset of ten interviews were used to categorize units of data [13], a process similar to the open coding process in Grounded Theory in which a code is attached to textual fragments [14]. New themes not previously captured in the initial subset were given new categories. Subsequently, individual categories are abstracted and pooled into higher order categories in terms of their relevance to the research questions. The next section presents the finding of our study.

FINDINGS

Transformation Of The Self

Physiological transformation

Energized/re-energized: our respondents indicated that gardening is a form of low-impact exercise very appropriate for the elderly. Depending on their availability, physical ability, and the size of the gardens, respondents spend 30 minutes up to two hours, once or twice a day at regular times or any free time, on their home gardens. Working in the garden and tending to the vegetables and plants not only improves mobility and flexibility but also helps lessen or even eliminate back pain that many elderly respondents suffered from.

Healthier because eating better: as opposed to commercially grown produce in which respondents expressed a lack of trust and even perceived to be toxic (from unregulated use of pesticides of questionable origins) and the main cause of increasing cancer and other illnesses, home-grown vegetables are believed to be safer, cleaner, fresher, and taste better. Respondents reported feeling healthier because of better dietary/vegetable intake.

Rejuvenated: advancing age makes mortality more salient for many elderly respondents, especially as they tend to spend most of their daytime at home alone before their adult children and grandchildren get home from work and school. Being active/working in the home garden makes consumers feel young again because they are productive and more connected with Mother Nature.

Mental/Psychological transformation

Regained sense of self-worth/esteem/self-efficacy: throughout the interviews, many respondents reported feeling useful and happy. These positive emotions emanate from five acts that respondents engaged in. First of all, home gardeners provide family, friends and neighbors with output from their gardens as well as gardening experience and skills. Secondly, they protect not only themselves and family members but also friends and community members and neighbors from the onslaught of unsafe produce on the streets or wet markets. They also provide home remedies for simple illnesses. Thirdly, some respondents use their home gardens as sites to teach their children and grandchildren about moral values, nature, and species. Fourthly, many respondents perceived plants as living, animate beings showing daily growth, and as such, the plants and vegetables in the gardens play the roles of the conversation partner, the care target and companion.

Finally, home gardeners are proud to show the fruit of their labor to family members, neighbors and community members as tangible cues of their love and care.

Independence/Autonomy/Self-actualization: some respondents reported making their own gardening decisions regardless of adult children's opinions and wishes. Despite living in the same household, the elderly in general experience a decline in their influence on family affairs as their children and grandchildren get older. When elderly home gardeners make their own selection of plants and vegetables, when and how often they tender to their gardens, they achieve self-actualization which brings them a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment.

Mental/Psychological "reset": home gardens, even those on a small terrace, can play the role of an urban oasis or solace, where gardeners de-stress and unwind, where they contemplate and seek solutions to everyday problems.

Beneficence: although most Vietnamese people are considered non-religious, many are spiritual and follow Buddhist teachings of conscientious, ethical and moral living. Helping others live a safer and better life through the sharing of output, knowledge, experience, and sensory pleasure (sight, smell, taste) brings mental and emotional satisfaction to home gardeners as they believe that moral living brings "good karma" for their offspring. Thus, gardening and the sharing of output brings more existential meaning to gardeners' role as parents and grandparents.

Patience: home gardening teaches consumers to be more patient with not only plants and vegetables but also themselves. Patience is considered a virtue in Buddhist teachings and is often a goal for many in the Vietnamese culture.

Productive hobby: because it is customary for the elderly Vietnamese to live with their adult children, many elderly people have nothing to do at home but to watch TV. Comparatively, gardening is perceived as a more productive pastime or hobby for the elderly. The more committed they are, the more satisfaction and enjoyment they derive from gardening.

Peace of mind: respondents also indicated that consuming home-grown vegetables eliminates worries of consuming toxic chemicals believed to be present in vegetables purchased from local markets.

Emotional transformation:

Reminiscing/Connecting with emotive memories: while tending to their gardens, many respondents reported a visceral experience similar to traveling back in time to emotional memories of people (loved ones, friends), places of attachment (hometown, neighborhood), time (childhood, yesteryears), and activities (laboring, gardening). While often bittersweet, these memories bring a sense of melancholy of the golden days before economic development and urbanization disrupted the tranquility of people's lives. These melancholic feelings can be therapeutic to consumers as they bring a sense of soothing attachment security.

Connecting with others (family members, neighbors, friends): due to their advancing age, older consumers often have less interaction with others as they are often constrained within the four walls of their residence. However, gardening motivates respondents to be outside and interact more frequently with not only family members and friends but also neighbors and community members. Through these interactions, sometimes home gardeners would receive seeds and cuttings from family members or neighbors to be

planted in their gardens. To some of our respondents, these embody the givers' love and care for them.

Cognitive transformation:

New knowledge and skills: while some of our respondents had prior gardening experience, others did not and had to learn new knowledge and skills through books, articles, advice shared in person or on online forums, even Youtube home-made tutorials. Acquisition of new knowledge and skills through self-teaching and successful implementation of this newly acquired knowledge are highly satisfying to novice home gardeners.

Transformation Of Others

Living space: besides transforming themselves, home gardeners also help transforming their surroundings as well as others around them. Due to the lack of available space in a crowded urban setting, home gardeners look for solutions in unused terrace, balcony or front and backyards and some are able to turn these unused spaces into an urban oasis for themselves and their families.

Unused public land: when they couldn't find space in their household for a small garden, some gardeners managed to turn unused sidewalk or public lots into vegetable gardens for their families and communities.

Discarded resources: some home gardeners were motivated by a lack of funding while others were simply being resourceful, respondents in our study made use of coffee grind, tea, and herbal blends as natural fertilizer for their home gardens. In addition, they also used discarded foam boxes and wooden crates as vegetable beds.

Community: community bond is created and strengthened through the sharing of output, experience, knowledge and skills between home gardeners and their neighbors. Respondents reported discussing with friends and neighbors the transformative benefits of home gardening and encouraging them to consider starting their own home gardens.

DISCUSSION

Our research investigates consumer and others transformations through home gardening in an urban setting where resources are scant. Initially motivated by food safety concerns, home gardeners are transformed physiologically, psychologically, mentally and emotionally through home gardening - from preparation of resources, acquisition of knowledge and skills, cultivation and finally harvesting. Importantly, gardeners also transform surrounding spaces, discarded resources as well as community relationships through home gardening. Our findings make important contributions to both the home gardening and transformative consumer research literatures and also provide practical public policy implications. We show that even consumers constrained by physical ability, lack of resources, insufficient knowledge and experience can still transform themselves and others around them. These transformations bring significant benefits to consumers, their habitat, and the community. It is our hope that findings from our study also provide exciting insights into "food well-being", one of the new foci in the TCR movement defined as "a positive psychological, physical, emotional, and social relationship with food at both the individual and societal levels" [11]. Our findings also suggest that policy

makers might want to consider promoting awareness of home gardening benefits as well as making readily available and accessible those resources that facilitate home gardening practices (such as soil, seeds, gardening tools, booklets, video tutorials, etc.) to assist consumers on their quest for food safety and transformative journey.

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