



What Drives the Attractiveness of Commercial Streets; Case Study: Beheshti Street in Bojnord (Iran)

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ABSTRACT: Beheshti Street in Bojnord is one of two main arteries in the city's commercial system, which is located in the city centre. Behashti Street, unlike most commercial streets, has no restaurants, coffee shops, fast-food stores, or any place to sit for recreation; however this street is too crowded every day, especially in the morning and in the period before the Persian new year, in March. This research studied the factors underlying the commercial attractiveness of this street from the consumers' point of view. The data have been collected using semi-structured interviews. According to the subject of this study, we have used a general inductive approach for qualitative data analysis. The results of this study show that consumers on this street are mostly the rural population. The results also suggest that the commodities have a greater impact on the commercial attractiveness of Beheshti Street. For rural customers, low price is the first priority, and then the variety of goods that are not found elsewhere. For the local customers, the most important factor was the existence of specialized shops. The environment of the street was of a lower importance. Very few respondents referred to the traditional atmosphere of the street as their motivation to go there. The interviews show that the consumers of this street have mostly utilitarian motivations and hedonic consumers are rare on this street. Therefore, we can say that the reasons of attractiveness of Street lay in its ability to meet the needs of its customers.

Keywords: Beheshti Street, Bonjard, Commercial Street, Commercial Attractiveness, Commodity.

INTRODUCTION

As a major urban function, retail trade is one of the most essential factors in creating attractiveness, and dynamic on the streets and in the neighbourhoods. It acts as a support for the various social activities and manifestations in the city. Retail trade is also one of the most important motivations for pedestrian traffic, which characterizes public spaces (Alonso-Provencio & Da Cunha, 2013). However, over the past two decades, the commercial function of cities has evolved considerably, and accordingly the consumers of products have developed their consumption of services and more recently the consumption of public spaces in downtown areas. In other words, "shopping areas for consumption" have been transformed into "shopping areas to be consumed", where visitors are attracted not only to a single type of consumption, but to a variety of offers

(Barbey, Gaillard, Pannatier, & Houmar, 2014).

Commercial attractiveness means the ability of a point of sale to attract buyers to its catchment areas (Encyclopédie illustré du marketing, [en ligne]). The concept of the commercial attractiveness of a shop is the degree of attractiveness felt by a consumer facing marketing strategies developed by various commercial sites (De Juan & Rivera, 2015, cited in Benbba & El Amrani, 2016).

Retail can take different forms, including sporadic retail units, passages, malls, commercial streets, etc. Our case study is a commercial street. A commercial street is "a segment of an urban roadway that is zoned into commercial use, providing pedestrian access to a variety of products and services (food, pharmacy, personal services, banking, restaurants, etc.)" (Thériault et al.,

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2004, p. 4, cited in Veillette, 2016).

Nowadays, commercial streets and shopping centres also work as places of recreation and leisure. Such a transformation of these streets is not merely connected to the presence of coffee-shops, fast-food stores, and gaming shops, for example, but is rather more related to the fact that the act of shopping has become a hobby in modern society.

Beheshti Street in Bojnord is one of the two main arteries in the city's commercial system. This street is a real urban space where the urban dynamic is remarkable, especially in the period before the Persian new year, in March. Beheshti Street, unlike most of the commercial streets in the city centres in Iran and other countries, has no restaurants, coffee shops or fast-food stores. Also, all the buildings are deteriorated, the façades are disordered, the urban furniture is worn and inadequate, and urban authorities has made no attempt to improve its urban landscape and its environmental quality. However, this street is very crowded every day. The main objective of this research is to study the factors underlying the attractiveness of this street from the customers' point of view. We also try to characterise the consumers of this street.

Despite the importance of this street, no research has been done on its attractiveness, customers' main reasons for visiting this street and the frequency of visit patterns according to the customers. Therefore, the present research can open up new research perspectives for academics and clarify some realities for urban authorities, planners as well as shopkeepers, for their future initiatives on this street.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Bojnord is a city located in north-east Iran. In 2004, after the division of Khorasan province into three provinces of Northern Khorasan, Central Khorasan, and Southern Khorasan, Bojnord was selected as the centre for the province of Northern Khorasan. The city then underwent a rapid growth, occurred with increased investment from the public and private sector. In Bojnord, unlike the big cities of Iran, modern commercial complexes on the periphery of the city have not become common, and indeed only recently has one commercial complex been constructed in the city. However, the creation of this new shopping centre has not decreased the rate of presence on commercial streets, and so the city centre still has the most important role in the commercial activities of the city.

The two streets of Taleghani and Beheshti are the

main commercial axes of the city (Fig. 1), and they are part of everyday life (Kazemi, 2014) in the city. Taleghani Street has an east-west direction that encompasses the whole city. In addition to the traditional shopping stores, many boutiques and modern shops have been added along the street in recent years. The street also includes some governmental offices, amenities, and recreational facilities. Beheshti Street has a north-south direction and runs perpendicular to Taleghani Street. The commercial units along this street are mostly dress, shoe, and fruit shops, and groceries. Most of the stores along the street are one-storey buildings of around 50 years old (Part Consultant Engineering, 2004). Behind these shops, there are old residential neighbourhoods that are now occupied by low-income people.



Fig. 1. The Location of the Study Area

METHODOLOGY

The data of this research have been collected using interviews. According to the subject of this study, we have used a general inductive approach for qualitative data analysis (Thomas, 2006). This is an analytic approach that is "generic" and is not labelled within one of the specific traditions of qualitative research (Ibid) like grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), phenomenology (e.g., van Manen, 1990), discourse analysis (e.g., Potter & Wetherall, 1994) and narrative analysis (e.g., Leiblich, 1998). We have chosen this method because it is a systematic and objective means to describe the phenomena (Krippendorff, 1980; Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Sandelowski, 1995) that allows the researcher to enhance understanding of the data (Weber, 1990; Burnard, 1996; Cavanagh, 1997). This study is done in an inductive way and is not based on an earlier



theory or models. In addition, no hypotheses is formulated at the initial stages of the research and the researcher is not sure about the nature of the findings until the research is completed (Dudovskiy, 2016). However, it is important to note that inductive approach may use theories when formulating research questions and objectives (Ibid).

Semi structured interviews have allowed us to explore efficient data. According to Bernard (1988), semi-structured interview is best used when you do not get more than one chance to interview someone and when you should send several interviewers out into the field to collect data. Another advantage of the semi-structured interview is that the interviewer is in control of the process of obtaining information from the respondent (Ibid). In addition to these arguments, we have chosen semi-structured interview for the street interview, because the respondents did not have so much time for unstructured interviewing.

We were specifically interested in customers aged 18 and above who voluntarily agreed to participate in our study. The topics covered in the interviews were: the objectives of consumers in attending Beheshti Street and their motivation for choosing it. We also asked them how often they visit this street.

Data saturation was reached after 40 interviews. Data saturation is the point in data collection and analysis when there is enough information to replicate the study (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012; Walker, 2012), when no new information can be attained (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006), and when further coding is no longer possible (Ibid).

Since shopping motives vary by time of day and day of the week, the data collection was performed at different times of the day and on different weekdays. The interviews were conducted in the last week of March 2017 and the first two weeks of April, 2017. The interviewees aged 25 to 50. The gender split was 32 females and eight males. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed then these stages have performed:

Stage 1: Reading the text

Stage 2: Breaking down the data in specific segments identifying the unit of analysis (sentences);

Stage 3: Coding (or labelling) the segments and building concepts from the data through multiple readings of the raw data;

Stage 4: Listing of all codes;

Stage 5: Reducing the long list of codes to a smaller number and creating the categories (through constant comparison);

Stage 6: Reducing the number of categories through combining or linking the categories with similar meanings;

Stage 7: Writing the findings: developing the main categories by describing and analysing them.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Who are the Consumers of Beheshti Street?

According to the interviews, almost all of customers of Beheshti Street are "utilitarian" (Tauber, 1972; Babin, Darden & Griffin, 1994; Ansemsson, 2006; Jones, Reynolds & Arnold, 2006). They can also be called "functional economic shopper" (Bellanger, 1980) or "shoppers" (Kazemi, 2014). The utilitarian aspect of customers' behavior is directed toward an economic need (Babin, Dardin, & Griffin, 1994). A utilitarian customers seeks to purchase effectively, having spent the minimum energy (Babin, et al., 1994; Kaltcheva & Weitz, 2006). According to Kim (2004), two dimensions of utilitarian motivation are efficiency and achievement. Efficiency refers to saving time and resources by customers while achievement refers to success in finding specific goods that customers has planned for at the beginning of the trip.

The interviews show that there is not many hedonic motivated or recreational shoppers on this street. Roaming in Bojnord occurs in Taleghani Street, where there are more stylish and attractive shops and markets and there are many food stores (restaurants, coffee shops, fast-food stores, etc.).

Another fact about Beheshti Street is that most of its customers are rural people. It is therefore necessary to propose a typology according to the origin of the customers: local shoppers and non-local shoppers. This classification could be important because the behavior, the time of visit and favorite shops or products are different between these two groups. Some of local shoppers explained the reason for their infrequent visits: "We don't come here frequently because there are no interesting things. Here is devoted to peasants" (a male, aged about 35 years old). A female respondent about 45 years of age also said:

"A special group of people go there, not all ... The working hours of shops on this street are also different from other places. They start at 7:30 in the morning. The shops are closed in the evening and the street becomes quiet as the rural shoppers go back to their villages. It is the opposite the shops on Taleghani Street, which open at 9-10 am and do not close until 11 in the evening. Two adjacent streets and such a huge difference!"

A woman about 35 years old said in her interview that: "I don't come here usually. One or two times a year... because the goods offered here fit the villagers'



taste in model, brand, material, and even colours”. It seems that the rare visits of the local people were due to their negative perception and mental image of this street. A woman about 30 years old who had gone there to buy fabric said:

“We don’t often come here because most of the people here are Turkmens. I don’t know why; I do not have any strong reason, but we do not come here much. The image that people around us have given us of this area is our main reason for not coming here. Maybe it is not a bad area, but it is the image the others have given us since our childhood”.

In terms of the frequency of visiting this street, the interviews showed that rural visitors went to the street

at shorter intervals compared to local people. Rural interviewees visited Beheshti Street once or twice a month on average to buy their necessary goods. Meanwhile, local people visited Beheshti Street one to four times a year (usually to buy specific goods).

While city-wide talking with different people, especially young people, it was observed that most young people living in the city have not yet gone to this street located in the city center near the main street during their lifetime, and do not know it at all.

Factors of the Attractiveness of Beheshti Street

The reasons given by respondents for visiting Beheshti Street are categorized in Table 1.

Table 1. Reasons for the Attractiveness of Beheshti Street, Identified in Interviews

Main Categories	Sub-categories	Concepts (Labels)	Repetition
The Commodity	The Price of Merchandise	Low Prices	21
	The Existence of Specialized Shops	Turkmen Shops	9
		A Special Fabric Store	15
		Wool and Cotton Shops	10
		Antique Shops	5
The Variety of Shops	Existence of All Things	12	
The Environment	The Environment/ Atmosphere	The Nostalgic Atmosphere	5
Total			77

Factors Related to the Commodities

- The existence of specialized shops

Specialized shops were viewed differently by the villagers and the local people living in the city. One characteristic of the street is the Turkmens’ specialized shops offering traditional clothes and textiles. All the villagers who referred to the specialized shops as their reason to visit this street were Turkmens who had come from nearby villages to buy clothes or textiles (Fig. 2).

“We’ve come to buy with family. We come every month or two. We come to buy clothes and food ... Just come to this street. It is our path. The things we want are often here, like Turkmen clothes, Turkmen fabrics” (A Turkmen male, living in the village, about 30 years old).

However, for the local people, these specialized shops are different: most respondents referred to certain shops, such as a fabric store and one or two shops that sold wool and cotton, for making mattresses and cushions. Some

also referred to antique shops that offered old-fashioned objects (such as utensils and aged lamps, antiques and jewels) besides traditional goods. There is also an old, well known nut shop which some interviewees mentioned as their main reason for visiting the street. The local people interviewed said that they rarely went to the street, and then only to buy certain special goods.

“Usually for purchasing items that are not found elsewhere, such as special local fabrics with old patterns or the local dairy products. I came once or twice to buy antique jewellery, too. There is an antique shop here” (A Female, about 35 years old, living in the city).

The existence of specialized shops is an important factor that is identified in previous research (e.g. Timmermans, 1980; Zhigalova, 2014). According to Zhigalova (2014), consumers trust more in products bought in specialized stores.



Fig. 2. Turkmens' Specialized Shops in Beheshti Street

- The price of merchandise

It was mostly villagers who mentioned the low prices of the goods offered in this street as their motivation to visit. Although this street is adjacent to the other main commercial street (Taleghani St.), there is a great gap between the prices of goods in these two streets.

A female respondent aged around 40 years old, who usually went to the street twice a week from one of the rural areas recently attached to the city, described her reason for choosing the street:

“Here, prices are lower compared to other places. Those areas are for rich people. We are the poor; we do all of our shopping here, clothes, etc. Basically, rural people come here often. Besides, there are many vendors here who sell at lower prices. But on the other street (Taleghani) there are no vendors. It is possible for us to go there for pleasure but not for shopping”.

The vendors mentioned by the respondents were also a cause of the attractiveness of the street for those on low incomes, especially the villagers (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Vendors in Beheshti Street



- The variety of shops

The variety of shops in Beheshti Street (like shoes stores, clothes store, fruit shops, grocery, home appliances) and the existence of vendors is a factor of attractiveness of this street especially for low income groups and rural population. A woman about 40 years old who said:

“I come here once a week and buy what I need, food products, clothes for my children, etc. I can find them all in this street”.

A young man who came with his wife said:

“We live in a neighborhood near here. We come to this street two or three times a week and we buy everything we need at home”.

Though Taleghani Street is also largely commercially diversified, the diversity on Beheshti Street is much higher. On Taleghani Street, as the price and the rent of commercial real estates are very high, only goods of high value are available so that the outcome becomes proportional to the value of the property. In recent years, commercial units offering low-cost goods have changed their function because they could not provide the rent. On Beheshti Street, however, as the price and the rent of commercial units are lower, there are also shops offering trivial goods in low prices.

The literature shows that consumers are looking for a unique place where they can buy all the products and services they need (Moreno Moya & Munuera Alemán, 2012, cited in Benbba and El Amrani).

The Environment and Atmosphere

Very few respondents referred to the environment and atmosphere of this street as a reason for going there. The interesting point here is that these respondents (all female) had left Bojnord after marrying and gone to Mashhad and Tehran to live. They come to Bojnord two or three times a year to visit their family. A 38 year old woman residing in Tehran said:

“In sum, this is an old and nostalgic area, although I don’t remember anything of its past. The antique tools that I thought they are not produced anymore could be found here in the stores, stuff like the antique lamps or some dishes from some decades ago”.

Another 40 year old female living in Tehran who had come to Bojnord to visit her family, said:

“I generally come to Bojnord more in the summer i.e. once a year. Within this yearly visit, I always come to this street. Generally, even if I have no intention to shop, I like to walk around the area because it still reminds the atmosphere of the past that I like”.

The interesting point here is that amongst the

respondents who live in Bojnord, only two people mentioned the street’s old and traditional environment. It seems that individuals with a medium and high social and economic class pay more attention to the environment and the atmosphere.

A review of the urban-design literature indicates that the atmosphere of a commercial street is one of the most effective factors in its attractiveness for people (Thang & Tan, 2003; Teller & Reutterer, 2008; Teller & Thomson, 2012). Environmental quality is related to the atmosphere and physical characteristics of a commercial street. But our study on Beheshti Street shows that the effect of environment on the attractiveness of this street is very low. This can be justified by the typology of consumers. Almost all of the people who come to this street are utilitarian consumers who intend to make a purchase (and not have fun or pass the time). For these people, the environment does not matter.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that the commercial offerings (the commodities) have a greater impact on the commercial attractiveness of Beheshti Street. For both groups of rural and local visitors, the goods offered on the street are the most important reason. For rural visitors, low price comes first in the ranking of factors, and then the variety of goods and the availability of goods not found elsewhere (Turkmen clothes). For the local visitors, the most important factor was the existence of goods that could not be found elsewhere, (specialized shops). The environment was of a lower importance.

Behashti Street, unlike most commercial streets, has no restaurants, coffee shops or fast-food stores, and therefore this is not a popular factor. This street has no place to sit for recreation, and so the most important factor, and perhaps the only factor, in its attraction is due to the goods and merchandises offered. Hedonic consumers are rare on this street and non-utilitarian values have no great influence on its attractiveness. Therefore, we can say that the attractiveness of Beheshti Street as attractive artery lies in “the possibility of adaptation to the needs of its customers” (Martineau, 1958, p. 48).

Many research (e.g. Teller & Reutterer, 2008; Veillette, 2016) have developed the subject of competition between commercial sites, but we did not find any research that has examined the concepts of “contradiction and difference” between commercial sites as factor of their attractiveness. The findings of our study suggest that Beheshti Street is not in competition with Taleghani



Street, but its differences with Taleghani Street is one of the factors of its attractiveness for its customers.

Another finding of this research is that in order to study the attractiveness factors of commercial sites and their customers, we must not consider only the city, but we must take into account the agglomeration as a whole (the city with its suburbs and rural areas).

CONCLUSION

In response to the main research question (what makes commercial streets attractive?) three important factors can be mentioned according to research findings: the type of goods offered on this commercial street; the prices of the goods supplied; and the historic and memorable feature of the street.

One of the most important features making the street attractive to shoppers is the type of goods offered on this street. All respondents have described it as “specialized”. Hence, being specialized was defined differently by the two different groups (the urban and rural population):

- The people’s viewpoint who live in nearby villages, mostly Turkmen who come to this street to buy the Turkmen clothes that are not offered elsewhere.

- The people’s viewpoint who live in the city and come to this commercial area to buy bulk fabric, wool, cotton, antique jewellery and so on that are not found elsewhere.

The second feature making the street attractive is the price of goods offered on this street. The type of goods offered, the cost of overhead shops (including rentals, etc.), the economic power of people and similar factors affect the price of goods and eventually inexpensive commodity is one of the features of this street. In connection with this feature, there are two factors interacting and exacerbating each other: First, each of the two Taleghani and Beheshti streets has segregated and stratified the people on the market by presenting different types of goods, various qualities and the displaying methods (the downstream and mainly buyers of goods are going towards Beheshti and the upstream and mainly users of the space are going to Taleghani Street). Further, the level of needs and the economic strength of people on each street has rearranged the pattern of goods offered and the price.

The third feature is the street’s being old and nostalgic that invites people to visit this street from time to time. Of course, the role of this factor is very small due to the addressees number of this feature (as detailed in the article).

However we can give some practical proposals to increase the attractiveness of this street not only for the rural population and low-income groups, but also for all social classes; to the extent that this street is transformed from a place exclusively for purchasing to a real urban space. To this end it seems necessary that the urban authorities execute the programs to improve the urban landscape, restore and rehabilitate the old buildings, and revitalize the architectural and urban heritage. In addition, the creation of recreational spaces (such as restaurants, cafes) and street furniture in collaboration with the shopkeepers can improve the environment and the atmosphere of this street and increase its attractiveness.



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