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Christmas markets – marketplace icon

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Abstract

Christmas markets, originating in Germany in the Middle Ages, have transformed from small-scale, local consumption spaces into a global icon for Christmas consumption behaviours. What has facilitated this rise to a global cultural commodity for experiential consumption? Tracing the history of Christmas markets, we highlight two characteristics that have facilitated their iconicity: openness across historical and cultural contexts and an ability to incorporate a variety of complex meanings that have, at different points, “masked” or enhanced their commercial nature. We argue that the maintenance of Christmas markets as marketplace icons will rely on their ability to continue to adapt to the consumption zeitgeist of the multiple environments where they operate.

Introduction

Christmas markets are popular seasonal consumption spaces in many countries around the world. Originating in Germany in the Middle Ages, these seasonal markets have over the centuries become established annual Christmas traditions with global spread, joining in with what had been, since the mid-nineteenth century, a rather stable configuration of Christmas traditions (Kimura and Belk 2005), including Christmas trees, presents, Santa Claus and Christmas carols and cards. Over the past few decades, Christmas markets have become part of the configuration of traditions that form the basis of global Christmas celebrations (Miller 2017). At present, Christmas markets in Germany, in several European cities and further afield, are major sites for consumption and tourism at Christmas (Jansen-Verbeke 1998) (Figure 1). In the following, we trace the ascent of these markets from spaces of local consumption to global cultural commodities for experiential consumption. What has enabled the transformation of these local commercial spaces, originating in Germany, into a global icon for Christmas consumption? What safeguards the appeal and continuation of these consumption experiences? These are the questions we address in this paper.

We highlight two ways that have facilitated the iconicity of Christmas markets within the market-mediated modern landscape of Christmas. First, we explain that Christmas markets follow a recognisable format that can be adopted and adapted across time and space. We argue that this openness has ensured their spread and longevity. We outline the rise of Christmas Markets to iconicity by showing how they have developed over the course of their history, reflecting the cultural discourses and consumption preferences of their time. They are therefore suited to meeting consumer desires in a variety of settings. Their adaptability has contributed to Christmas’ markets success across the centuries and to their development into global cultural commodities for experiential consumption. We explore Christmas markets’ continued appeal to the contemporary consumption zeitgeist through a discussion of the challenges faced by this marketplace icon based on an analysis of Christmas markets in the UK.

Christmas markets – part of the Christmas traditions portfolio

Analysing the iconicity of Christmas markets requires placing them within the wider context of Christmas, arguably an icon itself. Like other marketplace icons, for example champagne (Rokka 2017) or curry (Varman 2017), the origins of modern-day Christmas traditions are complex and pregnant with myth. Miller (1993, 2017) introduces the two predominant myths of origin that have shaped the modern-day Christmas that we know today: (a) Christmas has emerged as an amalgamation of seasonal festivals and their traditions in Ancient Roman times and (b) Christmas became a predominantly Anglo-American “invented tradition” in the nineteenth century, as various rituals and practices merged to form the crystallised and homogenised global celebration that we know today. Both explications have fed into modern-day Christmas celebrations. What these explanations have in common is that they bestow a degree of syncretism to the festival of Christmas that has facilitated its global spread. This syncretism has resulted in a distinguishable, yet open format, underlying worldwide Christmas festivities. It has facilitated an ability to adapt to changing societies and circumstances, meaning that Christmas has reinvented itself across contexts and time, while remaining relatively stable over the course of its history and global spread (Miller 1993, 2017; Kimura and Belk 2005).

Christmas traditions can also incorporate a variety of conflicting, sometimes even contradictory meanings. For example, Miller (2017) explains these contradictions by describing Christmas as “the time of family togetherness and also of family quarrelling, the first true global and the last true local festival, the expression of materialism but apparently also its repudiation” (436). Within this context, Christmas consumption is positioned as commercial and anti-commercial, materialistic and anti-materialistic, indulgent and altruistic, frivolous and modest (Hirschman and LaBarbera 1989). Sandıkcı and Omeraki (2007) observe a similarity between the versatile yet enduring scripts of Christmas celebrations and the way in which Ramadan rituals are modified, reinterpreted, and reinvented once facilitated in the marketplace. Christmas traditions arguably represent both the celebration and the commercialisation of contemporary rituals in global marketplaces. Against this backdrop, Christmas markets have become part of the portfolio of Christmas traditions that constitute global Christmas (Perry 2010). As we will see in the following sections, they have over the centuries provided consumption spaces that have facilitated forms of consumption reflecting the contemporary consumption zeitgeist of the societies that hosted them.

Tracing the ascent to marketplace iconicity: a history of Christmas markets

Marketplace iconicity is both a temporal process, as well as a status: exploring the social, economic and cultural history of certain products, brands and services can help in analysing how some transcend their everydayness to become pervasive and iconic marketplace products (Gopaldas 2016). Chaney (2019) charts the trajectory of rock festivals, distinguishing how each temporal phase marks a stage of their rise to, and status as, marketplace icons. Drawing on these historical approaches, we document the iconicity of Christmas markets beginning with their origins in Germany in the Middle Ages. We outline three distinct phases in which Christmas markets have turned from small-scale spaces of mundane consumption to major global cultural commodities for experiential consumption that carry significant commercial revenue opportunities within the modern Christmas marketplace (Table 1).

Phase 1. Seasonal consumption spaces (ascent to iconicity). Christmas markets were first recorded in Germany in the fourteenth century. In the lead up to Christmas, kings and bishops would grant extended licenses to existing weekly markets and allow the sale of additional seasonal foods and artisanal artefacts that could make Christmas gifts (Becker-Huberti 2001). Over the course of the next centuries, this tradition spread across most towns and villages throughout Germany and became an established feature of the pre-Christmas season. Until the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century, Christmas markets were spaces in which social classes mingled relatively harmoniously (Perry 2010): lower classes could purchase boots and housewares, farmers, the equipment they needed; more affluent classes could pick up artisan, and often expensive, handcrafted jewellery, toys, wigs, wood turned items. They were spaces which facilitated utilitarian and seasonal consumption to a cross-section of society; this made them popular with a variety of stakeholders, who were further attracted to the situational inversion of societal hierarchies that these consumption spaces provided (Miller 2017).

Phase 2. Experiential consumption spaces (defining iconicity). Following the industrial revolution, Christmas markets entered a period of significant changes, reflecting the social unrest and economic development of the times. By the 1830s, the relatively peaceful coexistence of social classes at Christmas markets had become the object of nostalgia or a (maybe idealised) past (Perry 2010). By the 1900s already, Christmas markets had become visitor attractions, meaning that their experiential potential often outweighed their utility as practical markets. The Christmas markets of industrial Germany were now often a rowdy, kitschy carnival where vendors were selling “cheap trinkets” (Perry 2010, 161) and hosting fairground rides.

Table 1 here

As to their commercial utility, they were places for the flaunting of new money, while the civic elites who had previously frequented these markets preferred conducting their Christmas shopping in the newly emerging department stores. The subsequent rise in carnivalesque culture surrounding Christmas markets meant that they fell into disrepute and were marginalised – geographically and metaphorically – to the fringes of society. Over the course of the twentieth century, Christmas markets have seen periods of decline and re-emergence. During WWII, and subsequently in the German Democratic Republic, they saw an upsurge as the respective ruling parties instrumentalised their ability to cater to a variety of tastes and needs for political, social and cultural purposes with the aims of increasing patriotism and social cohesion. For example, in Berlin and Nuremberg, Nazi mayors and city officials returned Christmas markets to city centre locations, creating public advertising campaigns that would appeal to the era’s nationalism and sense of tradition. Major events marked their “reopening” in both cities: processions, party officials’ speeches, communal singing of Christmas songs, the German national anthem, interspersed with calls of “Sieg Heil” highlighted patriotism and collectivity, both particularly desirable “German” characteristics of the time (Perry 2010).

Phase 3 Global cultural commodities (maintaining iconicity). The final phase in the rise of Christmas markets begins approximately three decades ago, with their success as cultural exports following the “German format”; this has transformed them into global cultural commodities for experiential consumption (DW Deutsch 2016; Deutscher Schaustellerbund e.V.

2017). The first “German Christmas markets” in the UK were started in Lincoln in 1982, and in Birmingham in 1997. In the United States, German Christmas markets were first held in New York (1995) and in Chicago (1996). Some European and Nordic cities and countries first hosted Christmas fairs well before this period: Spanish Christmas markets date back to the eighteenth century, while French and Swedish Christmas markets have been in existence since the Middle Ages. But other European countries – such as Belgium (Jansen-Verbeke 1998) or Italy (Brida, Disegna, and Osti 2013), for example – did not have an established Christmas market tradition pre-dating the late twentieth century. Beginning sometime in the late twentieth century, many European cities looked at the success of Christmas markets in German cities and began hosting their own (Jansen-Verbeke 1998).

The proliferation and mushrooming of Christmas markets following the “German format” has accelerated in the past three decades (Deutscher Schaustellerbund e.V. 2017). Such markets are currently major tourist attractions: in Germany alone, approximately 85 million people visit Christmas markets annually (Deutscher Schaustellerbund e.V. 2017). They also contribute to seasonal tourist revenue in several European cities (Jansen-Verbeke 1998). The UK is one of the countries that has seen a prolific rise in the spread and popularity of Christmas markets since the 1990s. Here, Birmingham’s Frankfurt Christmas market reported annual visitor numbers of 2.8 million in its 6th year, making it not only the biggest German Christmas market outside of Germany, but also placing it in the top ten most visited Christmas markets globally (Bloomfield 2010).

Nowadays, Christmas markets are held in various locations, from Switzerland to Singapore, and Japan to Johannesburg. Pictures of cosily lit wooden huts in market squares at night, buzzing with people, have become a core component of modern-day Christmas depictions in postcards, movies and advertising, contributing to the perception that Christmas markets represent a core constituent of meaningful rituals in the Christmas-celebrating world. Sometimes these markets are explicitly themed as German, while at other times, they adopt local and global Christmas traditions into the market structure. In media and popular culture, the imagery characterising these German-format markets has come to epitomise “the Global festive spirit”, also criticised as “the distilled essence of contemporary consumption in the predominantly Christian western world” (Belk and Bryce 1993, 277). When a lorry drove into a German Christmas market in Berlin in 2016, killing 12 people and injuring many more, shockwaves were sent across the world. Later, the assault was claimed as a terrorist attack. Such a traumatic event tragically attests further to the cultural symbolism that has come to be attached to Christmas markets globally, as an instantiation of experiencing Christmas.

Defining their iconicity: situating Christmas markets within modern-day Christmas

A key component explaining the longevity and adaptability of the German-format Christmas markets is their ability to be transferred across different temporal and cultural contexts. Similar to brands, products and services that have attained iconic status, consumption experiences gain their significance by capturing the imagination of consumers (Caru and Cova 2003; Lanier and Rader 2015). As a result, they become a core feature in the organisation of social relations in capitalist societies (Pine and Gilmore 1999; Schulze 1995). Their transferability across different cultural contexts is facilitated by two processes: deterritorialisation, i.e. taking a cultural pattern from its social context and applying it to a new

one in a different physical space, and reterritorialization, i.e. making a cultural pattern one's own by producing a local form in a new society and geography (for an example from music, see e.g. Yazicioglu 2010). Through the process of market mediation, the meaning of German Christmas markets is commercialised and transformed as it crosses borders. Eckhardt and Mahi (2004) explain that assimilation and acceptance of foreign goods is determined by their transformability of meaning and cultural compatibility between cultural contexts. This allows such consumption experiences to transcend their commercial nature and gain some measure of authenticity in these new contexts (Arnould and Price 1993). In the case of Christmas markets, their recognisable, yet adaptable formats facilitate a transformability of meaning that make them appear culturally compatible across time and space.

Carefully considered and structured, Christmas markets embed a variety of meanings inherent in modern Christmas festivities. For example, they seek to create an illusion of a unique Christmas consumption experience for consumers at that time of the year. This creates a tension for the dual history of Christmas markets as "authentic", unique spaces of traditional festive atmosphere and inauthentic, raucous funfairs that are positioned as poor imitations of those markets (Perry 2010; Humphreys 2014). The proliferation of similarly formatted German-style Christmas markets or the insertion of "German" products in un-themed Christmas markets makes them unlikely to generate unique, "authentic" or niche consumption experiences. A recent report about the success and economic impact of Christmas markets in the UK (NAMBA Market Place 2018) argues that visitors' expectations of authenticity appear more consistent with the notion of a theme. Visitors of a German Christmas market would expect to "drink real Bavarian beers, authentic quality Glühwein, and eat German Bratwurst or Currywurst", see "Alpine style wooden chalets set in a village theme" and "be served by the German / Italian / Polish trader on that stall". Conversely, in a Victorian Christmas market, visitors would expect to see "traders in Victorian costumes, Victorian style attractions and décor" (13). It seems that a lack of authenticity does little to dampen Christmas market organisers' ability to develop these Christmas-themed consumption spaces (Jansen-Verbeke 1998). The rising visitor numbers to Christmas markets corroborate this point, highlighting that consumers are willing to suspend their disbelief so that they can continue to enjoy these Christmas-themed consumption experiences (Castéran and Roederer 2013). The acknowledgement of authenticity as a property deemed important, but whose absence can easily be rationalised, problematises its centrality in the production of market-mediated experiences (see also Hietanen et al. 2020).

Christmas markets further derive their iconicity for being able to straddle the paradox of commercialism and anti-commercialism. Similar to brandfests (Kjeldgaard and Bode 2017), Christmas Markets display a mix of market-provided structures that are open to be co-opted by a range of stakeholders (e.g. traders, visitors, entertainers) within a temporal frame outside of traditional retail settings. Christmas markets cater to a wide range of individual desires from shopping and eating, to slowing down and socialising, all while providing consumer experiences of market-mediated togetherness. To appeal to their broad consumer base, organisers carefully script markets while allowing for some flexibility to respond to consumers' wishes. The below quote illustrates this position and tension from the perspective of a family business of German origin organising Christmas markets in the UK:

Xmas Markets Ltd. is a family run company who have been bringing the Christmas spirit and adding a festive atmosphere to locations across the U.K for over 15 years. We live

and breathe the Christmas Market all year ensuring we bring a traditional, continental style of market to U.K audiences. With offices in Cologne and London we work with talented British and European traders to ensure the highest quality of merchandise for every taste (<https://xmas-markets.com/>)

Consumption experiences often distinguish themselves from functional consumption. In consumption experiences, emotional aspects are foregrounded, enmeshing both the hedonic and utilitarian dimensions of consumption (Caru and Cova 2003). Christmas markets follow a format that is carefully crafted to cater to these sensual and hedonic desires of their visitors (Deutscher Schausteller- bund e.V. 2017). They provide opportunities for the transformation of anonymous purchases of commodities into a sociable and extraordinary exchange, which in return renders the commercialisation of Christmas less profane (Bartunek and Do 2011).

Maintaining iconicity: German Christmas markets in the UK

Although we have argued that Christmas markets are marketplace icons, their status is not unproblematic, and they have suffered as well as benefitted at the hands of the market (Prothero 2019). Using the example of German Christmas markets in the UK, we highlight some of the challenges faced by this marketplace icon.

The first modern-day Christmas market in the UK started in Lincoln in 1982, because of its twinning with Neustadt, and still to this day, stallholders from Neustadt exhibit at the market (Lincoln Christmas Market n.d.). Over the last 15 years, German Christmas markets have spread across cities in the UK, and grown significantly in size. The Christmas markets in Birmingham and Manchester have gone from a few stalls in the late 1990s to over 180 and 300 respectively in 2013 (Humphreys 2014). The rapid adoption and success of German Christmas markets in the UK is also evidenced by the rapid increase in visitor numbers (e.g. Bloomfield 2010) and widespread representation on social media. The hashtag #manchesterchristmasmarkets used 24,308 times on Instagram in 2017 – more than any other market in Europe (NAMBA Market Place 2018, 9). Visits to Christmas Markets are often listed amongst the essential activities that people ought to engage in during the festive season by lifestyle websites and magazines. Further, regular retailers, such as the big supermarkets in the UK, are now stocking German Christmas products which used to be available only at German Christmas markets (Humphreys 2014). Hence, the consumption of products that used to be seasonal and specific to the particular retail space, has now also evolved to become part of mainstream consumption practices in the UK. Christmas markets therefore join those marketplace icons that straddle both niche and mainstream markets (e.g. “organics” – Prothero 2019).

However, the desire to draw commercial benefit from the popularity of Christmas markets has led to an increasing number of organisers setting up markets in UK cities. We have already spoken about the growing commercialisation – at the cost of “authenticity” – of Christmas markets in recent decades. To date, it seems that this has done little to dampen visitors’ enthusiasm. Yet, perceived authenticity does have long-term effects on return visitors and on Christmas markets revenue (Cas-téran and Roederer 2013). As such, various operators’ attempts to capitalise on Christmas markets’ popularity in the UK without giving sufficiently detailed attention to the carefully crafted and expected Christmas theme may, in the long-term, contribute to their decline (Figures 4–6).

One of the key original features of German Christmas markets was their opportunity for inclusion and social inversion that resulted, in part, from their locations in central and accessible, i.e. inclusive, public spaces (Perry 2010). They also initially allowed for a variety of local traders to participate in the markets. In the UK, German Christmas markets are organised in public spaces, offering non-restricted access to visitors. However, following the terrorist attack at the Berlin Christmas Market in 2016, several (e.g. Birmingham, Manchester) have increased their emphasis on security, which visually restricts this ideal of a freely accessible and unfettered lived experience. Additionally, the Christmas markets industry facilitated through the city councils are often restrictive about who can organise and trade at Christmas markets. While the former often go through council-run tenders, the latter normally undergo a selection process guided by the market operators, city councils or similar bodies. The selection processes for organisers and vendors incorporate considerations towards creating an experience that is perceived “authentic” whilst also remaining true to local inclusivity. For example, German markets organised by the Frankfurt Tourism Board include almost exclusively traders based in Germany, who travel to the UK for the duration of the market. This limits access for other, non-German traders. Such restrictions have often generated discontent from traders who cannot gain access to the selection process in the first place. At other times, the cost of hiring stalls are so high that they prevent less established traders from being able to take part.

The desire to encourage tourism and to create opportunities for place branding underpinned the initial export of German Christmas markets. For example, the Birmingham German Christmas market was launched in 1997 because Frankfurt City Council was looking for a way to market its home-town overseas (Bentley 2015). Revenues for the cities that host Christmas markets and tourism to these cities have increased with their growing popularity. In 2018, British Airlines offered festive packages including flights and accommodation in twelve European cities hosting Christmas markets. However, as discussed above, the commercial success of German Christmas markets in the UK, is translated into the ubiquitous presence of German Christmas products in UK supermarkets at Christmas time. This broad availability of products, and at times, of seemingly similar retail aesthetics, may reduce the necessity for consumers to travel to visit a German Christmas market.

The success of German Christmas markets in the UK has benefitted from a “grass-roots pro-Europeanism” (Bloomfield 2010, 79). Will they become more or less relevant to British consumers once Brexit is implemented? Organisers and city councils are already expecting that exchange rates, import/export regulations and the anticipation of further delays and administrative burdens will negatively affect the participation of operators and traders from the European Union.

Some marketplace icons are ephemeral, or at least, of a particular moment – e.g. the iPhone – while others – champagne, the curry, the electric guitar and football – seem more enduring. The maintenance of Christmas markets partly rests in their ability to continue to speak to the consumption zeitgeist of the time (Varman 2017). British consumers experience German Christmas markets in the UK as an antidote to that dystopian values associated with consumption spaces of late capitalism, such as greed, the breakdown of community and cooperative social relations, and a rise in individualist, opportunistic behaviours (Warnaby and Medway 2018). The modern-day incarnation of Christmas markets in the UK thus speaks to the contemporary tastes of British consumers who (maybe tokenistically) appeal to a desired

transformation of capitalism and a return to more socially responsible economic and social relations (Amin 2009). In some ways, German Christmas markets provide consumers with an anachronistic experience of tradition, community as well as exotic but familiar festive spirit. Amid the rise in post-capitalist discourses, German Christmas markets create a simplified Christmas shopping experience that foregrounds sociality and community, while still providing a space for the material and commercial aspects of Christmas (Miller 2017).

Conclusion

Marketplace icons are often acknowledged for their cultural contribution, more so than their market share (Gopaldas 2016) and for their cultural adaptability (Varman 2017). Christmas markets have displayed two characteristics that have facilitated their iconicity: an adaptability across historical and cultural contexts and an openness to incorporate a variety of complex meanings that have “masked” or enhanced their commercial nature. Their maintenance relies on an ability to further negotiate and fulfil these functions in the multiple environments where Christmas markets operate. Christmas markets have transformed from marketplace players with modest iconicity to global icons within a relatively short period of their existence; it will be their continued ability to adapt that will also determine whether Christmas markets can survive as a marketplace icon in the future. Further- more, we wrote this article before the coronavirus crisis has changed the context for consumption in crowded spaces. We acknowledge that the future of shared consumption experiences, as exemplified by Christmas markets, seems transformed and uncertain at this time.

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