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Competing through service: Entrepreneurial bricolage and the servitisation of local drug markets

Introduction

The 'drug dealer' endures as a societal folk devil, portrayed within popular and political discourse as a predatory 'pusher', who exploit and rip-off customers (Coomber 2006). Though such characterisations may reflect some actors of the illegal drug trade, such depictions are reductive and ignore the diverse nature of drug markets and suppliers (Coomber *et al*. 2016; Salinas 2018). For instance, even amongst commercially oriented drug sellers, their values and practices often appear to constitute part of a 'service industry' (Moeller 2012), mirroring attributes endemic within the legal retail economy where a premium is placed on customer service (Pelling and Turnock 2023). Retail drug sales tend to garner relatively modest returns per transaction (Caulkins *et al*. 1999). The ongoing financial feasibility of a drug selling career thus depends upon attracting new customers and, more importantly, on fostering seller loyalty to ensure repeat custom (Coomber 2003, 2006). This article contributes to our understanding of the changing nature of drug markets, by examining the growing servitisation of localised drug markets, and the diverse service-oriented strategies use by suppliers in such markets to gain a competitive advantage.

The provision of customer services has long been central to drug sellers' attempt to build and maintain customer loyalty (Coomber 2003, 2006). However, recent years has seen an intensification of these efforts and a move towards more professionalised, customer service-centred marketing in illegal drug markets. This development is most evident in studies of global online cryptomarkets for drugs (van Hout and Bingham 2013, 2014; Masson and Bancroft 2018; Martin *et al.* 2020; Martin 2023), but is also reflected in research on localised illicit drug markets (Søgaard 2019a,b; Søgaard *et al.* 2019; Moyle *et al.* 2019; Bakken 2021; Bakken *et al.* 2023; McLean *et al.* 2020; Harding 2020; Pelling and Turnock 2023). Consequently, the practices of many commercially oriented drug sellers today align with those of licit service industries, reflecting attributes

common to the legal retail economy where customer service is highly valued (e.g. Pelling and Turnock 2023). Although existing studies highlight the incorporation of licit economy service logics and marketing tactics into local drug markets, this issue has often been addressed tangentially and seldom offers theoretical reflections on how to conceptualise service innovation within these markets.

To gain insights into how customer service has become central to drug dealers' illegal entrepreneurship, we draw on interviews with drug delivery service users and an analysis of drug commercials sent by delivery dealers, operating in a cosmopolitan Danish city we call 'Varcity'. Our approach, which draws on customer experiences, aligns with prior studies that have used consumer insights as a proxy to gauge levels and modes of customer service in drug markets (Martin 2023). In the analysis, we categorise drug dealers' customer services into three forms: pre-purchase services, in-store services (i.e. mid-purchase services), and post-purchase services. Beyond outlining the customer-centred strategies employed by sellers, we also provide a theoretical framework to understand how these forms of market innovation are occurring in the manner they are. We propose that since local drug markets are often de-centralised, lacking overall coordination and control, and because local sellers often have limited resources at hand, the process of service innovation in such markets can fruitfully be analysed using the concept of 'entrepreneurial bricolage', defined as the 'making do by applying combinations of resources at hand to new problems and solutions' (Baker and Nelson 2005: 333). In the analysis, we demonstrate how local drug sellers in Varcity engage in a process of entrepreneurial service bricolage, involving fragmented imitations of sales tactics common within the local legal retail-sector environment, as means of achieving a competitive advantage in the selling of drugs. We argue that drug sellers' entrepreneurial service bricolage is contributing to a process of 'drug market gentrification' in Varcity, here meaning a 'replacement of potentially violent social norms with more cordial, professional relationships between market participants' (Martin, 2023: 130).

The political economy of service competition in local drug markets

The current move towards customer service approaches in the selling of drugs is most clearly evidenced in research on online cryptomarkets for drugs with a global outreach. Indeed, customer services appear built into

the technical architecture of cryptomarket platforms. This includes searchable listings of products, systems dispute resolution, and escrow systems i.e. methods where the sellers only receive payment after the buyer has confirmed receipt of the product (Munksgaard *et al*. 2023). Such markets also publicise customer feedback whereby sellers and products are rated – mirroring legal digital marketplaces such as Ebay and Amazon (Barratt and Aldridge 2016). Studies also show that many cryptomarket sellers aspire towards a professional service ethos (van Hout and Bingham 2014; Martin *et al*. 2020), and that customers are attracted to cryptomarket because sellers are perceived to be 'nicer', compared to the hostile, violent and chaotic exchanges often perceived to characterize offline drug markets (van Hout and Bingham 2013; Masson and Bancroft 2018). On cryptomarkets, the high level of customer service is incentivised by institutional social controls (Martin 2023). For instance, prospective sellers often must agree to a set of standardised rules before being allowed access, and administrators can close non-abiding accounts. The feedback system also enables customers to identify and avoid problematic sellers, thus assisting in fostering pro-social exchanges between sellers and customers.

Importantly, however, recent studies suggest that customer service provisions are also becoming increasingly important as a competitive marketing strategy in many localised drug markets (Søgaard 2019a,b; Søgaard *et al*. 2019; Moyle *et al.* 2019; McLean *et al*. 2020; Harding 2020; Bakken 2021; Bakken *et al.* 2023; Pelling and Turnock 2023). Sellers across a wide range of drugs – including crack cocaine, cannabis, party drugs, and image and performance-enhancing drugs – are increasingly attentive to satisfying customer needs and preferences through prompt deliveries, hassle-free transactions, promotional offers (e.g. 'freebies'), and displays of pro-social demeanour (Hales and Hobbs 2010; Grundetjern and Sandberg 2012; Salinas 2018; Søgaard *et al*. 2019; McLean *et al*. 2020; Harding 2020; Bakken 2021; Bakken *et al.* 2023; Gibbs 2023; Pelling and Turnock 2023). The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) recently highlighted this trend, referring to the increased promotion of services by cocaine sellers – such as 'fast delivery anywhere at any time' – as the '[u]bernisation' of European cocaine markets (EMCDDA 2018: 18). While some sellers continue to use violence as a business strategy (Mclean *et al*. 2020), the provision of sleek

and effective customer services has become increasingly crucial for building a positive brand and ensuring customer retention (Harding 2020).

Below we outline some of key structural factors which have contributed to the increased servitization of local drug markets. The importance and overlap of these factors will vary depending on the context.

A market response to urban gentrification

In their study of the rapid transformation of drug markets in Manhattan's Lower East Side during the 1990s, Curtis *et al.* (2002) demonstrate how 'urban gentrification', meaning the transformation of working-class or vacant urban areas into middle-class residential and commercial zones (Zukin 1987), can be a key structural factor leading local drug sellers to adapt to their evolving clientele by developing more customer-orientated service approaches. While Manhattan's Lower East Side had previously been characterised by poverty and open-air drug sales, Curtis *et al*. describe how urban redevelopment schemes (including intensified policing of open-air drug sales) and changing demographics of the neighbourhood during the 1990s had led middle-class drug users to constitute the 'bulk' of custom. Concurrently, they observed how the area's open-air drug markets had been supplanted by discrete (analogue) phone and beeper-based delivery services; drug transactions now occurred in private settings and were largely devoid of the violence that once characterised the neighbourhood's markets. This early study highlights how even localised, and minimally technologically sophisticated, drug markets can exhibit elements of customer service provision, and how structural urban developments can be a driver in this process.

Increased competition in illegal markets

Another key factor driving the shift toward improved customer relationship management is increased competition among a growing numbers of drug suppliers in local drug markets (Hales and Hobbs 2010; McLean *et al.* 2020; Harding 2020; Pelling and Turnock 2023). Deindustrialisation and the rising prominence of the gig economy have contributed to the decline of high-quality 'blue-collar' jobs and to a growth of precarious, minimum-wage, casual or part-time employment in the service sector, disproportionally affecting young people with fewer educational qualifications (McDowell 2003; Furlong 2015). These changes have led

more young people to seek alternative sources of income as entrepreneurs in the illicit drug trade (Bucerius 2014; Hesketh and Robinson 2019; Fader 2019; Harding 2020; Fraser and Joe-Laidler 2024), resulting in increasingly competitive local drug markets. Since drug markets typically function as unregulated 'lemon markets', where competition based on product quality and price is hindered by information asymmetries, many drug sellers turn to other creative strategies to remain competitive (Beckert and Wehinger 2013). Some attempt to eradicate rivals in a bid to monopolise the market (ibid.), while others seek out new less competitive markets e.g. in rural areas (McLean *et al.* 2020; Harding 2020). However, increased market competition can also result in professionalization, with entrepreneurial sellers trying to gain a competitive advantage through a two-tier marketing strategy, including proactive 'spamvertisement' – the circulation of 'drug commercials' through phone lines or social media apps (Søgaard *et al*. 2019; Moyle *et al*. 2019; Bakken 2021; Bakken *et al.* 2023) – and employing customer service approaches (McLean *et al*. 2020; Harding 2020).

Technological innovations

The proliferation of new technologies, such as mobile phones and social media, has also played a key role in the growing emphasis on customer service as a competitive strategy. Most recently, the rise of social media markets has made the sales strategies of competing drug sellers more visible to one another while making it easier for buyers to switch suppliers (Bakken *et al.* 2023). In these highly competitive digital environments, many drug sellers now seek to attract customers by presenting themselves as professional and friendly, and by communicating details via text about drugs, prices and customer services, such as delivery radius, free samples, and refunds for dissatisfied customers (Moyle *et al.* 2019; Bakken 2021; Bakken *et al.* 2023). Additionally, some social media networks host forums, where the sharing of information functions as informal feedback systems, incentivising drug sellers to offer high levels of service, also extending to offline drug-for-money exchanges (Bakken *et al.* 2023). While technological market innovations can drive *increased* competition through enhanced service, they do not fully explain why 'service' has become a key competition strategy. To understand this, we need to examine the links between shifts in both licit and illicit economies, and in the evolving nature of work.

Embeddedness in the legal service sector and criminal co-learning

The boundaries between licit and illicit markets are often porous and shifts in the modus operandi of licit enterprise are sometimes mirrored by illicit enterprise (Fraser and Joe-Laidler 2024). Indeed, Martin (2023) argues that tactics employed by drug vendors on cryptomarket, such as branding and the use of customer service marketing, are likely to have been adapted from digital sales and retail practices in the legal economy. This argument is plausible and likely also applies to sellers operating in various types of drug markets.

The empirical literature demonstrates how extensively drug sellers engage with the legal service economy. Not only do drug sellers avidly (and conspicuously) consume goods and services in the legal economy, many also have direct experience from employment in the legal service/retail sectors (Salinas 2023). While dissatisfaction with (the prospects of) low-paid service jobs can motivate individuals to sell drugs, research indicates that many working-class drug sellers concurrently hold legal jobs in legal retail or service sectors such as telephone sales, taxi driving, cleaning, parking attendance, office assistants, fitness instructors or at restaurants and fast-food outlets (Bourgois 2002; Sandberg and Pedersen 2011; Bucerius 2014; Fader 2019; Berry *et al*. 2023). This 'doubling up' of income serves various purposes: it helps underwrite subsistence and other living costs (Fader 2019; Salinas 2023), provides a legal exit strategy from the illicit market (Bourgois 2002; Berry *et al.* 2023), or results from mandatory job training programs (Sandberg and Petersen 2011). For more socio-economically advantaged drug sellers – sometimes referred to as the 'unusual suspects' of the drug trade (Salinas 2018) – drug selling often functions as a supplementary part-time 'side-hustle' role used to supplement income from legal service sector jobs such as bar work or taxi-driving (Salinas 2023). Indeed, in some contexts drug sales are facilitated by an individuals' employment in the legal nightlife service economy (e.g. Jacques and Wright 2015; Turner 2023). Some, most likely a minority, are enrolled in formal educational business programs parallel to being drug sellers (Moyle and Coomber 2019; Søgaard and Bræmer 2023). Others invest in or use another person's legal retail/service business to launder money (Berry *et al*. 2023), and many drug sellers are also likely to have friends or parents who work in the legal retail/service sector (Salinas 2018). In short, significant evidence corroborates the notion that drug sellers often have intimate knowledge of the legal service and retail sectors.

In the legal service economy, much of the value is derived from front-line workers' ability to manage positive and friendly customer interactions (Hochschield 1983; McDowell 2003). While some drug sellers might view legal service jobs with distain – seeing such work as servile performative labour that conflicts with traditional notions of masculinity (Bourgois 2002; Bucerius 2014) – they are nevertheless likely to vicariously absorb valuable ideas, tips and techniques that they later apply to refine their drug selling practices. It is also reasonable to assume that the proliferation of service-based sales tactics in local drug markets results from criminal co-learning, where sellers learn by observing and imitating the practices of more entrepreneurial drug selling friends, collaborators or competitors.

Analytic framework

Though existing studies point to a growing integration of licit economy service logics and marketing in drug markets, none theorize service or offer a theoretical framework for understanding such integrative processes.

Conceptualising customer services

Commerce scholars define customer service as 'all activities performed by retailers and their personnel to attract, retain, and enhance a customer's shopping experience' (Grewal *et al*. 2008: 342). Within this field, customer services are typically divided into three broad categories: (1) *Pre-purchase services*, which include the provision of technical systems to facilitate easy product ordering, information on products and prices, and offering delivery services (Cao and Gruca 2004). Depending on how transactions are organised, product delivery can also be categorised as a post-purchased service. (2) *In-store services*, include frontline workers using interactional 'emotional labour' and 'aesthetic labour' to convert prospects into repeat customers (Hochshild 1983; Warhurst *et al*. 2000). Aesthetic labour refers to how front-line staff present themselves and the attractiveness of the sales environment (Warhurst *et al*. 2000; Pettinger 2006), while emotional labour refers to employee's management of behaviours and expressions to heighten the customer experience, such as smiling or presenting oneself as friendly (Hochshild 1983). (3) *Post-purchase services*, can include tools or efforts that allow customers to rate their experience, as well as retailers' initiatives to optimise the customer's

experience of the product, for instance, by offering advice on product usage (Cao and Gruca 2004). Traditional post-purchase services also include gestures of appreciation, such as complimentary drinks to restaurant customers upon payment (du Gay 1996). The above distinctions between pre-purchase-, in-store-, and post-purchase services provide a useful first step for our later analysis of service provisions in local drug markets.

Theorising service innovation

Another useful starting point in understanding the integration of legal sector service tactics in drug markets is to view it as a form of innovation. Scholars of business administration and marketing define 'service innovation' as 'novel (re)combination of resources' to achieve a competitive advantage (Witell *et al*. 2017: 290). Research in this field emphasises that the process of service innovation is shaped by external contexts, including whether an organisation or individual operates in a resource-rich or resource-scarce environment (Baker and Nelson 2005; Witell *et al*. 2017). At the two extreme ends of this continuum are the 'systemic model' and the 'bricolage model' of innovation.

In the systemic model, service innovation is understood as a rational design process within an organisational context centred on problem identification and the effective combination and adjustment of new resources and practices to fit explicit goals, standards of excellence and procedures. In the systemic approach, innovation is a top-down process that involves seeking out new resources, co-ordination, collaboration, co-evaluation, and formalisation (Fuglsang 2018; Witell *et al*. 2017) – as such, it is often associated with larger companies or public institutions that possess significant economic, technical, human, and intellectual resources.

As an alternative to the systemic model, scholars exploring entrepreneurship and service innovation in resource-scarce environments have drawn on the concept of 'bricolage', derived from French anthropologist Lévi-Strauss' work on mythical thought and cultural creativity (2004/1966) (see Baker and Nelson 2005; Witell *et al*. 2017). In his work, Lévi-Strauss contrasted how engineers and bricoleurs performed work tasks. While an engineer follows specific plans and procedures, a bricoleur improvises and makes do with 'whatever is at hand' (Lévi-Strauss 2004: 17). Inspired by Lévi-Strauss, Baker and Nelson (2005) coined the term 'entrepreneurial bricolage', arguing that in resource-constrained environments, creative and serendipitous combinations of existing resources for new purposes can serve 'as a mechanism driving the discovery of

innovations in the form of new "services" from existing resources' (Baker and Nelson 2005: 335). The repertoire of resources that bricoleurs 'make do' with can be odd, varied (e.g. social, material, technological, personnel, ideas), inexpensive or free resources, that others might regard as useless but when strategically recombined can create solutions or help take advantage of opportunities (Baker and Nelson, 2005). While improvisation and 'making do' may often provide temporary 'good enough solutions' (Witell *et al*. 2017: 293) – which may be neither perfect or elegant – they can nevertheless provide a competitive advantage to organizations or individuals in resource-scarce environments (Baker and Nelson 2005). Indeed, at times, bricolage can have 'brilliant and unforeseen results' (Lévi-Strauss 2004: 17).

Service innovation in drug markets

Due to their illegality and constant threat from law enforcement, most drug markets are characterised by a lack of centralised coordination (Martin 2023) and frequently manifest in contexts marked by resource constraints and scarcity (Bean 2014). Drug sellers therefore lack the same economic capital of legal firms and operate with minimal personnel. Indeed, sellers typically operate independently or in small partnerships and often possess limited formal education or expert commercial knowledge (e.g. Qasim 2018; Fader 2019). Consequently, drug markets display little evidence of systemic service innovation. One notable exception is within cryptomarkets, where customer services (e.g. systems for dispute resolution, escrow and rating systems) are embedded within the digital market platforms. Since these markets also exhibit a relatively high degree of institutionalised social control (Martin 2023), service innovation within this context may, to some extent, follow a top-down systemic model. However, cryptomarkets also show evidence of more eclectic and idiosyncratic forms of service innovation developed by individual sellers. And in most other types of drug markets, characterised by less centralised coordination and control, this latter form of service innovation is often all that exists.

In this article, we propose that the concept of 'entrepreneurial service bricolage' is a useful for analysing how service innovations in local drug markets are often contextually conditioned and involve an idiosyncratic appropriation and a re-working of service marketing tactics from the licit economy. Contrary to scholars such as Hebdige (1988) and Clarke (2006/1976), who have applied the concept of bricolage to explore how

subcultural youth appropriate and subvert mainstream culture as acts of resistance, we argue that drug sellers' entrepreneurial service bricolage involves a creative imitation of legal sales tactics (including efforts to conduct themselves in a friendly, trustworthy and professional manner), as a means of symbolically positioning an illegal activity (the selling of drugs) within the boundaries of mainstream civil society – in the hope that this will attract and retain more spending consumers.

Data and method

This article draws on interviews with 28 predominantly middle-class drug customers, who buy drugs such as cannabis, cocaine, amphetamine, and MDMA from drug delivery services operating in the Danish city of Varcity (a pseudonym). In addition, the data includes an analysis of 99 drug adverts disseminated by local 'delivery dealers' through SMS-based drug lines to the study's participants. Varcity was once an industrial centre but has undergone significant gentrification and is now recognised for its cultural institutions, knowledge industries and university. It hosts one of the largest student populations in Denmark and has a higher-than-average proportion of residents with higher education degrees. Despite these attributes, several of its neighbourhoods experience low levels of education and income, as well as high rates of crime and unemployment. The city's burgeoning illicit drug delivery market caters in part to a cosmopolitan clientele and is reputed to offer superior customer service compared to other Danish cities and towns. While the origins of this local culture of service-orientated drug selling remains unclear, the market differs from those in other large Danish cities, insofar as freelancers and small dealing collectives have emerged as dominant market actors, rivalling biker gangs and street gangs that are more present in other Danish drug markets (see Søgaard *et al*. 2019). Data collection was conducted by the first author and a research assistant. The study was approved by the Danish Data Protection Agency. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

The participants were recruited as part of a project investigating the experiences of drug users sourcing drugs from delivery services (see Søgaard 2019a,b). All interviews were carried out face-to-face and lasted between 1 and 3 hours. The criterion of inclusion was that participants needed to have experiences with buying drugs from delivery dealers. Participants were recruited through a combination of convenience sampling from

the first author's acquaintances and snowball sampling from known contacts, who referred friends with relevant experience of sourcing drugs from drug delivery services. The interviewees consisted of 16 men and 12 women, aged between 17 and 37 (mean age 26). In terms of their occupational status, five were unemployed, ten were students at applied or higher education institutions, two were researchers, two worked in public administration, six were social workers or employed in the service sector, and three worked in the music and entertainment industry.

In Denmark, drug selling via social media has not replaced the phone-based market (Søgaard *et al*. 2024). While some Danish delivery dealers continue to communicate with customers strictly by use of analogue phones, others have adopted a multichannel sales strategy, utilising both analogue drug phone lines and social media apps to help market their drugs (Korshøj and Søgaard 2024). The interviewees reported typically using phone calls and SMS to communicate with delivery dealers, with social media apps used to a lesser extent. Twelve participants were daily or weekly users of drugs, predominantly cannabis; 16 described themselves as occasional recreational users of cannabis, cocaine, MDMA/ecstasy and amphetamine.

Interviewees reported regular exposure to drug adverts, which they received either directly as a group-based SMS or via social media posts/direct-messaging. Many of the participants provided examples of these adverts with the researchers during the course of their interview. In some instances, participants forwarded the SMS advertisements they had received. However, a few participants continued to forward drug commercials to the researchers for months and even years after their interview. During their interview, some participants read aloud drug commercials they had received. In the transcript of the interview, the drug commercials that were read out loud were subsequently identified and saved. In total, the researchers collected 99 group-based drug commercials sent by drug sellers to customers as means of advertising their products and services.

Interview transcripts were coded inductively based on emerging themes such as: motives for choosing specific dealers; experiences of dealers' marketing strategies; views and experiences of the provision of customer services; experiences of interacting with dealers; etc. Consistent with other studies that suggest consumer perspectives can provide valuable insights into the customer service strategies of drug suppliers

(Martin 2023), this research draws on customers' experiences as well as the content of drug commercials to examine the prevalence and nature of service provisions as marketing strategies in local drug markets.

Results

The Varcity delivery market for illicit drugs: A buyer's market

Varcity's retail drug market appeared to be a buyer's market, with interviewees each reporting between three and ten contacts for local drug delivery services (i.e. phone numbers or Wickr accounts). Some sellers sold only cannabis, others offered a wider product repertoire, including cannabis, cocaine, amphetamine, and MDMA/ecstasy. These consumer insights support prior research on this city's drug economy, which observed a highly competitive retail market composed of numerous small and larger-scale drug delivery schemes (Søgaard *et al.* 2019).

Varcity's local delivery market functioned as a semi- or fully-open market, insofar as customers reported very low access thresholds amongst delivery dealers – ranging from needing no introduction to needing only brief intermediary referrals. Prior research has documented how delivery dealers in Varcity openly promoted their services on the streets, distributing their drug-line phone numbers and social media accounts to potential customers (Søgaard *et al*. 2019). Our interviewees confirmed these practices, with several noting how some suppliers actively encouraged them to disseminate their contact details with peers, with some sellers incentivising referrals with offers of 'freebies'. The aggressive promotion of their services and the use of incentives aimed towards expanding their customer base marks a shift from traditional, trust-based relations towards more brazen marketing strategies (cf. Pelling and Turnock 2023). Another notable shift was the increased emphasis on customer service, with many interviewees highlighting this aspect of their experience of purchasing drugs from delivery dealers.

> When I started buying drugs [ten years ago], it was these somewhat hard-core types selling, where you were a bit nervous about getting into their car. But now, they've gotten insanely service-minded. (Dennis, 28 years of age).

Several interviewees with protracted histories of engaging with the local drug economy believed increasing competition had prompted suppliers to develop customer service principles as means of gaining a competitive advantage within the city's seemingly saturated retail markets:

> It's the customer experience, which is really important, because there are so many dealers to choose between, and its more or less the same product they all sell… So, it's in the small things where they have to differentiate […] It's the customers' [market] (Tommy, 28 years of age).

Just as in the legal retail sector, the profitability and sustainability of retail drug supply often relies upon cultivating seller loyalty and repeat purchases, rather than relying on one-off or infrequent high-value sales (Salinas 2018; Pelling and Turnock 2019). In localised drug markets such as Varcity, the provision of good service and being attentive to 'the small things' could heighten customer satisfaction and thus incentivise customer retention. However, due to the absence of a structured and centralised retail drug market, local drug sellers did not develop a homogenised customer-oriented sales strategy, nor did they display equal commitment to service ideals. Instead, local drug sellers' efforts to achieve a competitive advantage emerged through unevenly distributed bricolage-style service innovations.

Supplier's pre-purchase services: Convenience and speed of delivery

In customer interviews, the term 'service' encompassed a range of drug seller practices, particularly the provision of delivery services. In Varcity, the dominant drug delivery model resembled traditional supply models used in the restaurant/takeaway food delivery sector. Consumers placed an order with a seller (using phone calls, SMSs or apps), then waited for the seller to deliver the drugs to a specified location – such as a home or pub – where the exchange of drugs for money would take place. In this context, sellers' delivery service could be categorised as a form of pre-purchase service, similar to those in the legal retail sector.

In the customers' descriptions, 'service' referred not only to the free-of-charge delivery offered by sellers, but also to the flexibility sellers provided in allowing customers the choice of location for delivery. Cars were the most common mode of delivery, though a minority of interviewees reported receiving drug deliveries by sellers on foot or by bicycle. In customers' accounts, measures of service also related to the speed of delivery.

While many sellers in Varcity were reported to have operated swiftly, response times varied depending on the location of buyers and the time of day, with peak demand (i.e. Friday and Saturday nights) coinciding with longer delivery times.

Despite drug sellers often competing through speed of delivery (e.g. Hales and Hobbs 2010; Søgaard *et al*. 2019), interviewees had each experienced extended wait times. Repeat incidents of delayed deliveries were cited as a key reason by customers who switched supplier. To placate potential customer dissatisfaction and mitigate the potential loss of future custom, some sellers made use of – and indeed advertised – compensatory measures for late deliveries, mirroring strategies employed by some in the fast-food industry (e.g. Domino's Pizza '30 Minutes Free Pizza Delivery Policy). Some suppliers also provided customers with estimated times of delivery, by texting customers roughly five minutes prior to arrival – once again, mirroring strategies employed in the licit economy, such as taxi or food delivery businesses. This practice helped limit the time customers had to wait outside, in the often cold and rainy Danish weather:

> I got this routine; I text my guy [drug seller]: 'Can we meet'? Then we agree when and where to meet. He texts me five minutes before his arrival, which gives me time to go to an ATM across from where I live. Then he arrives and I get into his car. He gets money and I get the drugs. Then we talk a bit about football or whatever. Then I say, 'thank you, and see you'. That's it. I go back upstairs to my apartment. (John, 33 years of age).

As the above indicates, drug customers in Varcity were privy to various pre-purchase services, including flexible and speedy deliveries. This type of service innovation closely mirrors strategies in the legal retail sector, where fast-food chains, restaurants, grocery stores and companies such as 'Wolt' [a Finish food delivery company operating in 27 countries, including Denmark] offer rapid product delivery. It is an example of how drug market service bricolage involves drug sellers imitating existing practices in their surroundings. In addition to delivery, sellers offered streamlined shopping and ordering processes via the use of analogue phones and social media. Consumers not only placed orders via these forms of communication, they also received pre-purchase marketing information (i.e. drug advertisements) relevant to their needs, once again imitate legal marketing efforts employed by businesses using social media and through SMS (Aslam *et al.*

2016). These commercials included product menus promoting the range of drugs on sale alongside pricing information, special offers, and suppliers' hours of operation.

> Hey Friends. Unfortunately the
> summer holiday is ending, hope
> you enjoyed it. Also hope you
> had a great weekend, and that we
> can help make it even better 😉
> Prices on brown [hash] is 1.5 [grams] for
> 100 [DKK], 5g for 250. Green
> [marijuana] is 1.4 [grams] for 100 5g for 300.
> Open 12-23[:00hrs] every day 😊
> See you out there, have a nice evening.
> (Drug commercial).

Such SMS-based commercials provided customers with key pricing information, including per-unit pricing and discounts on bulk purchases, thereby enabling customers to make informed choices between different sellers. Notably, as the above commercial illustrates, the tone and language used in these adverts was often friendly and approachable – something discussed in further detail below.

Supplier's in-store service: Interactional service work

Though some interviewees recounted unpleasant incidents where delivery dealers acted in ways perceived as rude or intimidating, none reported having been victimised (e.g. ripped-off or physically attacked). One interviewee provided a typical example of how interactions with suppliers could be seen as unpleasant:

> It is not that they're aggressive, but some of them are very assertive. I'm sure they just feel panicked. They got a car full of drugs, right. But they'll open the [car] door with some level of aggression and be like: 'get in!' You get in and they just drive. You don't know where you are going. Then, they stop at a carpark, and say: 'what do you want?' The whole thing just feels a bit intimidating. (Daniel, 27 years of age).

Despite many having experienced unpleasant interactions, interviewees characterised their typical interactions with suppliers as peaceful, friendly, and even pleasant. Many sellers appeared to engage in both emotional and aesthetic forms of labour (Hochschild 1983; Warhurst 2000) during customer interactions, that enhanced the customers' transactional experience and helped build and retain customer loyalty.

The physical exchange of drugs-for-money typically occurred inside the delivery driver's vehicle, which functioned as a mobile retail shop. While some customers described their initial sense of vulnerability and unease about first entering a car with unknown 'drug dealers' (cf. Søgaard 2019a), most emphasised the cordial nature of these social interactions, with several participants drawing direct parallels to their experiences interacting with staff in the legal retail and service sectors:

> It's a bit like when I walk into a kebab-store and the kebab-man says: 'Hello my friend!' It's like this service-thing, where I feel welcome. Actually, you might say, it's pretty much like walking into any other store: How does it feel when you enter? What customer-service do you get? What product do you get, and to what price? And I simply get fantastic service […] I got the sense that they [the dealers] prioritize me (Jacob, 31 years of age).

This positive, customer-centred approach was also evident in the way that small-talk, jokes, general politeness, and advice regarding the drugs on offer characterised many suppliers' conversational demeanour. These interactions helped foster a friendly atmosphere, helping to make what is a clandestine, criminal and at times uncomfortable process feel more familiar:

> I enjoy buying [drugs] because it is a funny experience. They [sellers] are very easy going and friendly, and if you are uncertain about what to buy, they help you. If they are smoking [inside the car], they might ask you; 'Is it brothering you'? (…) Some of them like to small-talk, like, 'Are you doing something this Easter'? Or, 'What are you up to tonight'. You know, small-talk, like you'd have in many other stores (Maria, 28 years of age).

Beyond these examples of emotional labour within customer-seller interactions, many of the more committed sellers engaged in aesthetic labour to enhance the buying experience. In most cases, this involved maintaining

the cleanliness of the vehicle's interior. However, some interviewees described efforts of certain suppliers who re-designed the interior of their cars, which helped transform the transaction into an experiential event, making it a more pleasurable and memorable buying experience. In the legal retail economy, similar efforts by shopkeepers to make their shop look and feel attractive (Pettinger 2006).

> It can be funny buying [drugs]. This one guy, he really made something of his car. You get into his car, which is like a mix of a taxi, a nightclub and a pizza delivery service. It's got blankets on the floor, decorations and lights and all… He installed this blue light coming up from underneath [the glove compartment]. It's kind of like a nightclub atmosphere… and there is music on, not too loud, so that you can talk, and he put up these things that smell [nice]… I mean it's a short but intensive service experience (Annette, 21 years of age)

Conversely, a lack of attention to the environmental aesthetics or cleanliness was sometimes a deterrent for customers:

> There are these two guys who bring [drugs] out real fast. I don't know how they do it. But when you enter their car, it's like you entered a dumpster. You don't know where to put your feet because there are empty bottles all over… It's disgusting, disgusting… you're always afraid you sad on something nasty […] I only buy [drugs] from those guys when it totally impossible to get hold of someone else […] I like nice things. My flat is always tidy and clean. (Lise, 24 years of age).

As the above indicates, cleanliness and general aesthetics were at times valued by customers ahead of speed of delivery. Sellers' efforts to project a customer-friendly image were also evident in SMS-based drug commercials circulated to customers, where suppliers often presented themselves as likable, funny, and trustworthy. Sellers routinely addressed customers as 'friend(s)', they used cordial and affable language, and often expressed a generalised (if somewhat superficial) interest in customer wellbeing:

> Hello friends! Hope you are doing well.
> I'm back again with the best stuff.
> I have an offer, 1 [gram of cocaine]

for 400 [DKK] 😊.
You call, I bring.
Best, Mickey Mouse
(Drug commercial)

Other interactional service practices included offering redress for customer complaints concerning the quality of purchased products, though the degree to which customers were able to seek redress was governed by the degree to which suppliers judged them to be 'good' customers (i.e. those who were regular and profitable) (cf. Pelling and Turnock 2023).

For suppliers to act toward customers in a friendly and cordial manner during their brief interactions requires neither additional resources nor job-specific skillset. Similarly, maintaining cleanliness, installing cheap ornaments and decorations, or providing customers with estimated and updated delivery times are simple yet effective strategies to garner customer loyalty. Despite their simplicity, such practices shaped the customer-supplier interactions into positive ones – and, in so doing, made the experience of buying illegal and often stigmatised commodities feel safer and more pleasant. These consumer-centred practices exemplify bricolage-style service innovations, where drug sellers imitate methods from their proximate legal retail/service environments and apply them to their criminal occupation.

Post-purchase services: Gifts and gimmicks

Similar to observations in other drug market settings, the offer of customer 'freebies' (e.g. free samples or additional volumes of drugs) (cf. Coomber 2003; Ladegaard 2018; Pelling and Turnock 2023) also formed part of the customer service repertoire offered by Varcity's drug suppliers as a reward of customer loyalty. However, our data also shows a novel development with some suppliers gifting small items to regular customers. The following drug commercial illustrates the range of gifts offered to customers, including cheap consumables such as soft drinks, lighters, beers, chocolate and other confectionary:

SALE!! SALE!! SALE!! Hello everybody, hope
you are enjoying the Easter holiday. Sorry we've
not been up and running the last few days…

> But now we are back from 12 to 23 every day.
> We've got a lovely light and soft smoke. The price
> on brown [hashish] is 2g 100 [DKK], 5g 200 [DKK] and 10g
> for 400 [DKK]. The more you buy the better your
> bonus-gift. We got gifts for the first buyers.
> There are 48 Redbulls, coca-colas, juice, lighters,
> candy and ready-made joints! Two week offer.
> See you soon best regards PPT
> (Drug commercial).

Though the mentioning of 'bonus-gifts' in text-based drug commercials can be said to form part of suppliers' pre-purchase branding, the actual offering of such gifts is best categorised as a post-purchase service, because gifts are given only after the money-for-drugs exchange.

It is common practice in many Danish retail outlets – such as hairdressers, bakery shops, clothing stores, and pizzerias – for customers to be offered a small piece of confectionary as a gesture of thanks for their custom. Likewise, many Danish restaurants offer customers complimentary deserts or small drinks upon their purchase. In this way, post-purchase 'bonus gifts' offerings for illegal drug purchases imitate similar cultural practices in the legal service and retail economy, and further exemplifies drug suppliers' bricolage-style service innovation aimed at incentivising and rewarding customer loyalty.

The above is an example of drug sellers creating bricolage service innovations from cheap mainstream consumer goods, which are used to enhance the customer experience in an illegal market. While bonus-gifts are of little economic value, they carry symbolic value by conveying appreciation to customers. The nature of the bonus-gifts is also noteworthy insofar as the gifts demonstrate the sellers' cultural knowledge of their userbase. For instance, lighters are a necessity for cannabis or cigarette smokers and are therefore an item of value. Likewise, smoking cannabis lowers the user's blood sugar, leading users to crave sugary snacks or become thirsty, which is why suppliers dispense sweets and soft drinks. The post-purchase service of offering bonus-gifts enhanced interviewee's overall transaction experience, as the following excerpts illustrate:

> Sometimes some of them [suppliers] have an offer. If you buy 3 grams [of cannabis] you also get a Coca-Cola, because you get thirsty when you smoke. The way I see it, that's just good service, and it's a bit funny too. (Sonja, 19 years of age).

'Bonus-gifts' were not necessarily attached to each customer interaction, as many suppliers limited bonus-gifts to the first set of customers each day and/or to customers buying larger amounts. Some suppliers also employed a competitive gimmick during the sales transaction, whereby customers rolled a dice and those who rolled a '6' received a bonus-gift, as the follow commercial illustrates:

> Now we are open 24/7 friends!
> We try something new, we got lots
> of gifts in the car, roll a 6
> and chose one of the many things
> we brought along in the car.
> Good day out there.
> (Drug commercial).

The addition of such a gimmick adds a playful dimension to an illicit exchange and may have helped remove some of the initial feelings of unease described by some customers. The use of dice games by retail drug sellers mirrors a similar practice in some Danish retail stores (e.g. Black Friday sales events) or as part of some price-based alcohol promotions in Danish pubs and nightclubs, which is sometimes referred to as 'roll a dice for the price' (in Danish: '*slår terning om prisen'* or '*rafle om prisen'*). A key difference, however, is that the 'prize' for winning the dice game employed by drug sellers is a 'bonus-gift' rather than a price reduction or free drugs. Such gimmicks construct the drug-purchasing-event as a pleasant, funny, and memorable experience for customers – rather than one imbued with the stereotype and stigma of 'traditional' street drug markets. In doing so, customers may be more inclined to continue using their services.

While drug sellers' use of game-like promotional strategies first emerged in Danish phone-based drug delivery markets, the use of such gimmicks is now also used by local delivery dealers selling in social media groups. Given that local markets often lack centralised control and coordination, the dispersion of these

customer service innovations and changes in criminal scripts, likely also result from drug sellers learning from competitors.

Concluding discussion

The provision of customer services has long been central to drug sellers' attempts to foster customer loyalty and maintain the financial viability of their illicit operations. However, recent years have seen an intensification of this process. While prior studies have highlighted the incorporation of licit economy service logics and marketing techniques in both online cryptomarkets and localised drug markets, this article is the first to offer a theoretical framework for understanding these integrative processes. Given that most retail drug markets are characterised by disorganisation, diversity, resource constraints, and local embeddedness, we argue that the concept of entrepreneurial service bricolage is a valuable lens for analysing how service-based innovations in drug markets emerge from context-specific conditions. These innovations frequently involve a mirroring and re-working of licit economy service logics and marketing tactics into drug seller practices.

In the analysis, we observed how Varsity's local drug sellers appear to vie for a competitive advantage through a fragmented adaptation of supply logics, behavioural codes, and sales tactics from the legal retail and service sectors. This included direct marketing via drug commercials (featuring opening times, competitive per-unit pricing, and price discounts for larger orders); the development of friendly and cordial demeanours within in-person customer interactions and digital communiqués; rapid and flexible delivery services; updates on delivery times; compensation for late deliveries; sales promotions (e.g. discounts on bulk orders); and enhancing the appearance of delivery vehicles. We noted how such strategies mirror the tactics employed by legal services, such as taxis, food delivery, and retail stores. Additionally, some drug sellers imitated cultural practices found in local retail stores and restaurants, including use of 'bonus-gifts' as a gesture of appreciation, and employing sales gimmicks which add a unique and playful dimension to the illicit transaction. These service innovations do not require significant planning, resources or expert skillsets, but rather involve creative combinations of existing resources – 'whatever is at hand' – to build and maintain customer loyalty. These innovations may not represent a paradigm-shifting criminal advancements like those seen in online

cryptomarkets (see Aldridge and Decary-Hetu 2014), but instead constitute incremental forms of innovation, subtly tweaking traditional criminal scripts. Studying illicit bricolage-style service innovation, however, offers a nuanced understanding of how retail-level drug sellers differentiate themselves in saturated and highly competitive markets, and how such practices can contribute to a process of 'drug market gentrification' (Martin, 2023), where potentially violent social norms are gradually being replaced by more cordial and professional relationships between market participants. In Varcity, the local drug delivery market can best be described as only partially gentrified, because occasional systemic market violence against competitors persisted (see Søgaard *et al*. 2019), with some sellers providing a professional and effective customer service while retaining violence as a component of their business strategy (cf. Mclean *et al*. 2020).

The demography of Varsity – with its large student population and a large middle-class – coupled with the myriads of fragmented drug supply partnerships and freelancers (rather than predominantly gang-operated supply), likely created the structural conditions that engendered more customer-friendly sales methods compared to other cities or settings. Indeed, several interviewees appraised the level of customer service amongst Varcity's suppliers as notably superior to that of other Danish cities and towns. Thus, the extent to which retail drug markets (more broadly) have become 'servitized' is difficult to determine. However, a more general point can be drawn: many retail drug markets are inherently local, and this local embeddedness might influence the service-based sales methods employed by drug sellers. Coomber and Turnbull's (2007) asserted that a key aim of drug market research should be to explore the characteristics of different drug markets. As such, we propose that the concept of 'entrepreneurial service bricolage' provides a useful lens for future research on customer-centred marketing innovation in other drug market settings. This concept emphasises the local embeddedness of innovation (i.e. making do with 'whatever is at hand'), and the seemingly endless potential for improvised combinations in the making of customer-oriented services. We acknowledge that our reliance on consumer insights to gain knowledge of the service strategies of drug sellers presents a limitation; future research would benefit from incorporating the perspective of suppliers.

Lastly, our data challenges the conceptualisation of illegal drug retailers as predatory 'pushers' (Coomber 2006). While their strategies to incentivise sales may be seen as a fundamental tenant of 'drug pusher' folklore,

it is our contention that these customer 'cultivation tactics' (Jacobs 1999: 60) mirror practices employed in most commercially orientated endeavours to market and incentivise goods and services in the legal economy. This parallel disrupts and reorganises the conventional meanings associated with drug dealing. As such, the continued use of 'pusher' terminology within public discourse is reductionist; it oversimplifies the complexities of drug marketing and suppliers and undermines efforts to gain a better understanding of the mechanics behind drug supply.

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