

# Daily social interactions of hawkers as a catalyst to actuating bottom-up spatial justice: experience from Hong Kong

Izzy Yi JIAN, Zi YANG, Kin Wai Michael SIU\*

\*Public Design Lab, School of Design, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University  
m.siu@polyu.edu.hk

## Abstract

The concept of bottom-up spatial justice is conceptualised as the capacity of streets to offer diverse experiences for street users. The concept advocates for caring the disadvantaged groups and incorporating their needs in design. Based on the premise that informal economic activities in public spaces make cities vibrant, dynamic, and safer for keeping 'more eyes on the streets', street hawking, a representative of such activities, provides alternative public spaces, offers job opportunities and convenient daily services for the vulnerable groups, especially those deprived ones. The everyday lives and social interactions of hawkers resonate with various urban discourses. Yet, hawkers have rarely been placed at the centre of favourable intentional legislation, instead, they are largely disregarded, rarely supported, licensed following a strict manner, often regulated and sometimes aggressively discouraged or even expelled by relevant authorities. There is still a paucity of studies recognising the role street hawkers play as urban informal sectors in facilitating bottom-up spatial justice. A conceptual framework that proactively guides the co-creation of a more inclusive and just street life is lacking. Through the medium of a case study of Sham Shui Po, one of Hong Kong's densest and poorest districts, qualitative methods are adopted in this research as on-site environment audition, unobtrusive observations; photo and video recording and note-taking in streets to expound the street hawkers' temporary appropriation of streets as social spaces, and investigate their daily interactions with the surroundings that facilitate diversity and inclusion. Findings are examined through the critical perspective of spatial justice to highlight the dynamics needed to (re)produce an engaging, informal and inclusive public life. A design guideline that calls for more participation of vulnerable stakeholders, preserving street hawking and maintaining urban informality with care is proposed to advise relevant policy-making and practice.

## Keywords

social interaction; street vending; spatial justice; inclusive design; care;

## Introduction

Worldwide, countries and regions have long relied on street vendors (also known as hawkers or peddlers) as a vital part of the economy (Bhowmik, 2005). The vending practice is a

popular informal activity and can be opted as a medium of livelihood and job opportunity for people who are relatively low-skill (Adama, 2020). There are an estimated billion street vendors offering goods or services at an affordable price in public spaces, accounting for a significant share of informal non-agriculture employment in Asian cities (Sekhani et al., 2019). This predominantly own-account or self-employed group is under constant scrutiny as a mediator to untangle 'informality' (Tucker & Devlin, 2019). Researchers have argued that the close observation of those 'informal workers' businesses reveals a connected, coexistent, and complex relationship between the 'formal' and 'informal' aspects of commercial exchanges (Sekhani et al., 2019).

Governments around the world have made efforts to regularise street vending (Kinoshita, 2001). Providing hawkers with licenses is a typical approach. However, most studies treat hawkers as a homogeneous group (Lata et al., 2019) and regard them as the antithesis of relevant urban authorities. Hawkers receive limited legal protection in terms of labour rights and working conditions (Sekhani et al., 2019). They, especially unlicensed street hawkers, are seen as the source of urban conflicts (Al-Jundi et al., 2022). Iveson (2013), in response, raised concerns over spatial justice by arguing that both context and spatial justice should be normatively integrated when investigating urban informality, and that, to some extent, corresponds to a 'hands-off' approach (Iveson et al., 2019).

Seeking spatial justice is part of reclaiming public spaces for individuals and the collective. Different groups, regardless of their class and background, should have the right to access and participate in the process of geographical (re)production (Soja, 2013). By negotiating and resisting collectively, hawkers are able to cope with challenging situations (Al-Jundi et al., 2022) and generate a higher degree of certainty with respect to their free use of public spaces (Tucker & Devlin, 2019). The understanding of the positive influence of vendors' social practices and their patrons on the promotion of spatial justice in public spaces needs to be enriched.

The article unfolds as follows. We begin by presenting street vending as a common global phenomenon and exploring hawkers' acknowledged daily situations. We ground our findings in critical theories of spatial justice in public space. Next is a presentation of the major findings, notably the social dynamics of street vending in Sham Shui Po, Hong Kong.



We conclude by arguing that understanding how street vending in densely-populated cities provides shelters and refugees for socially and economically marginalised groups is a precondition for intervening to construct spatial justice in public spaces.

## Literature Review

### Street vendors in public spaces

Researchers regard street vending as a bridge connecting the informal with the formal economy (Siu, 2007). Besides food, street vendors purchase a substantial number of goods produced by small factory workshops in the informal sector and sell them to economically disadvantaged groups at lower prices. They are also popular among middle-income individuals for offering essential and affordable services that may not be easily found in municipalities or larger retail stores (Bhowmik, 2005). People patronise street vending for the accessible and convenient service provided, with necessary goods being fairly priced. They feel grounded and willing to support the hawkers (Igudia et al., 2022).

It is common for hawkers to be stationary, occupying space on the pavements or other public or private spaces. Itinerant vendors who move from one place to another by carrying their goods on push carts are not unusual at the same time (Bhowmik, 2005). These features make vendors often show up on sidewalks, parks, intersections, leftover spaces and privately owned spaces such as outdoor shopping malls (Cupers, 2015). In this sense, the accessibility of public spaces, streets in particular, is an indispensable resource of income for vendors (Adama, 2020).

However, governments worldwide are, more or less, reluctant to consider street vending as a legal activity (Bhowmik, 2005), not to mention recognising their positive influence on the city. Especially in much of Asia, street vendors are perceived as the opposite side of the ideal clean, beautiful and functioning city image, and therefore, are seen as inimical to the interests of the society (Bhowmik, 2005). Many governments have attempted to regulate or prohibit the activities of street vendors (Graaff and Ha, 2015).

Numerous studies showed that street vendors are not provided with adequate physical, policy and social protection (Sekhani et al., 2019). They are claimed to have to constantly confront different forms of uncertainties, including resource limitations (e.g., inadequacies in infrastructure such as running water and toilet), merchandise being confiscated by relevant authorities (Sekhani et al., 2019), threat of eviction (Bhowmik, 2005), and risks posed by policy makers and law enforcement agencies (Jiang & Wang, 2022). As a result, street vendors live in precarious and uncertain lives. On the other hand, choosing to be a street vendor typically corresponds to the person being not well-educated, having less capital to invest, and possessing limited skills to showcase (Sekhani et al., 2019). They are generally in less privileged positions and are more vulnerable than their counterparts, and therefore, deserve more attention.

Some of the recent literature also depicts that, in some cities, street vending is part of people's culture, tradition, way of life or gesture of kinship (Igudia et al., 2022). While previous research focuses more on the locally negotiated relationships that enable vendors to bargain with different stakeholders to ensure temporary security over use of public space (Lata et

al., 2019), it is necessary to undertake a similar effort to understand the important role street hawkers play in promoting spatial justice in public spaces during their daily interactions and negotiations. Our effort here is to explore this issue.

### Street vending in Hong Kong

Hong Kong, an iconic world city of extreme high density, has a street vending history of more than a century (Kinoshita, 2001). The government, taking into account health, hygiene, safety and traffic, has implemented policies for regulating and protecting street vendors over the years. At the end of 2021, Hong Kong urban areas had 5,051 licensed fixed-pitch hawker and 153 licensed itinerant hawker (Knott, 2022).

Back to 1973, the Hong Kong government devised the Hawker Permitted Area Scheme, allowing hawkers to trade freely within designated areas. The scheme has been revised several times, such as being changed in 1979 to the Hawker Permitted Places (HHP) Scheme. Licensed hawkers currently are allocated modularised fixed-pitch hawker stalls to conduct their daily trade practice. This potentially enables them to keep proper hygiene (Legislative Council Panel, 2014).

From 2019 onwards, influenced by the social unrest and the COVID-19 pandemic, the city's economy stagnated and declined, leading to the relaxation of street vending regulation. A 'more tolerant approach' was taken towards unlicensed hawkers in light of the economic conditions, while the government still maintained about 190 squads of Hawker Control Teams to help regulate hawking activities.

### Bottom-up Spatial justice in everyday life

Spatial justice in public spaces is a recent topic that draws attention to putting public spaces at the centre of urban politics and conflict (Jian et al., 2020). The topic examines the physical distribution of public spaces and raises numerous concerns pertaining to who has the right to public spaces and how that right is determined, contested, and claimed by different groups (Jian, Chan, Luo, et al., 2021; Mitchell, 2003; Siu, 2013).

According to Jian et al. (2020), spatial justice in public spaces encompasses five aspects under three dimensions, namely access and management; sociability and diversity; demand and provision; social stratum and information, and social inclusion. While 'diversity has long been used as a conceptual tool to assess planning outcomes with spatial justice considerations, the ability of public space to facilitate social interaction is also an essential indicator that helps examine whether a space is inclusive for diverse users (Jian, Chan, Xu, et al., 2021). As claimed, to seek spatial justice is to create more public places with more diversity for different people, instead of creating the same space without acknowledging heterogeneity (Jian et al., 2020).

Spatial justice in public spaces, together with the right to work in the city (Lefebvre, 1996; Adama, 2020), is of particular importance to this research issue since it raises the question of the vendors using different kinds of available public spaces to carry out daily activities (Lefebvre, 2014; Mitchell, 2003; Soja, 2013). Crucially, this argument points to the important phenomenon that street vendors are denied crucial indicators of their right to the city that involve their rights of accessing and appropriating public spaces, thus omitting their role in facilitating bottom-up spatial justice (Lata et al., 2019; Siu & Zhu, 2016). This is reinforced by the fact that the

available public spaces for street vending are decreasing owing to accelerating commodification and privatisation (Graaff and Ha, 2015).

As a representative urban informal sector, the socio-spatial exclusion faced by hawkers manifests as being under surveillance routinely, risk of being moved out of the space, or even violent encounters with enforcement agents (Adama, 2020). Female hawkers are reported to occupy smaller places. They sell perishable, less popular and less profitable commodities in less strategic spaces, making them easier targets for eviction (Adama, 2020). Well-positioned vendors usually feel more empowered to capitalise on uncertainties (Tucker & Devlin, 2019).

In response, street vendors are adopting a range of spatial, temporal, and relational tactics to maintain their daily business and rights of using public space. These tactics include but not limited to those highlighted by Adama (2020): ready-to-run, move to safer places, depend on informal relations and networks, and function only in specific hours. On the other hand, while street vending is under strict regulation, policy executors sometimes do not insist on eviction. Instead, they are open to, or encourage negotiations (Adama, 2020). This results in a liminal grey space (Lata et al., 2019) that nurtures the inclusiveness of the public spaces and facilitate spatial justice.

**Methodology**

Sham Shui Po, one of Hong Kong’s densest and poorest districts, was selected as a case study owing to the vast number of residents taking advantage of the streets to engage in informal economic activities. Two streets in this district, Apliu Street and the connecting Pei Ho Street, were selected as the observation area, as Apliu Street is one of the representative ‘hawker permit’ zones officially endorsed by the Hong Kong government. Along the street, licensed hawkers market their goods in uniformed stalls. Furthermore, these two streets were designated as part-time pedestrian streets from 12:00 pm to 9:00 pm every day by the Transportation Department of Hong Kong. Vehicular access is only permitted at other times (Transportation Department, 2017).

Before collecting the data, the two selected streets were visited and mapped to identify the best observation spots. Data on the everyday interaction of street vendors were collected through first-hand observation from June to September 2022, including both working days and weekends, and covering two public holidays, namely Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Establishment Day and the Chinese

Qualitative methods, including on-site environment audits, unobtrusive observations, photo and video recording and note-taking, were adopted to facilitate the data collection

**Table 1.** Observation time

Selection criteria	Observation time periods
Warm weather to carry out outdoor activity	June 2022 to September 2022 Temperature ranged from 33 to 35 degrees Celsius
Public holidays	Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Establishment Day, Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival
A day observation unit represents four sections with street activity.	Morning (9–10 am), Early Afternoon (12–2 pm), Afternoon (4–6 pm), Nighttime (6–10 pm)

process. The collected data were analysed through a categorical coding approach. Themes related to the various forms of street hawkers’ temporary appropriation of streets as social spaces, as well as themes concerning the interactions among objects and spaces, are analysed and presented below.

**Results**

Overall, the observation yields 382 photos and 58 videos. We supplemented this process using random chats with vendors and their patrons. In line with some previous studies, hawkers in Sham Shui Po consist of people of diverse socio-economic situations. They can be easily differentiated with respect to gender, age, ethnicity and types of activities and the spaces they occupy. Males predominate in businesses like electronics and antique vending, while females are more engaged in selling fruits, vegetables, clothes and ornaments. Care can be observed in the interactions between street vendors and their customers, as well as the support and camaraderie that vendors offer each other.

In general, behaviours in public spaces present two forms: *human – human communication* and *human – object interaction*. While the former can be further understood from three aspects, namely social interactions among street vendors, between street vendors and their patrons or family and friends, and among patrons, the latter can, to a large extent, be comprehended from the perspective of solitary behaviour.

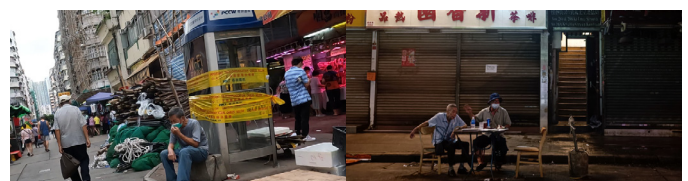
People who visit this vending market, besides making essential or random purchases, also tend to spend time communicating with friends or strangers, or just to pass the time by hanging around, ‘window shopping’. Notably, the most common type of interactions that occurred along the street is between street vendors and their patrons, as this underpins the primary function of the market. These commercial activities comprise behaviours around shopping, such as bargaining and demonstrating products or services. Care is demonstrated in these interactions, as vendors may offer advice, assistance, or



**Figure 1.** Street vending in Sham Shui Po **Figure 2.** People sleeping on the street



**Figure 3.** Vendors chatting with their patrons



**Figure 4.** People sitting along the street

**Figure 5.** open-air dining

recommendations to their customers. Chatting among street vendors, especially during the evening, was also commonly observed in the markets (Figure 1 to Figure 6 present selected representative behaviours in the vending street). People were observed staying (i.e., eating, sitting, waiting, playing with their phone), working (i.e., selling goods, rag-picking), moving (i.e., walking, cycling), chatting, looking around, purchasing, lying, and even sleeping on the streets. During the process, people encounter, experience and tolerate the differences in the public spaces. The care shown by street vendors to their fellow vendors and customers helps to create a more inclusive and supportive environment within the market.

On the other hand, the study results suggested several types of human – object interactions in the streets. Street vendors utilise objects to claim space to work, occasionally bending regulations to do so. Care can be observed in the way vendors adapt and arrange their objects to make the most of the available space while considering the comfort of their patrons. While people, mainly the street vendors, claim the space through occupying using their odds and ends, in ways of enlarging or extending their pitch, the street also offers people a comfortable vibe to enjoy solitude. People were observed eating alone, playing with cell phones alone, sitting alone (e.g., sitting alone on the handrail; on the stall; on a concrete curb), and using the street as a transit station to wait for others alone. We also found one person sleeping alone on a temporary bed made of bubble chamber and cardboard. Whether he is homeless or not, the street provides him with a safe place to rest (Figure 2).

In fact, most activities happened in the streets with a purpose – commercial operation, while spontaneous communication and interaction rarely occur. Yet, hawkers potentially add to the vibrancy and inclusiveness of the street by directly engaging in the social communication with other people, as well as providing space and a setting for people to start conversations. Street vendors act as a catalyst to creating a safe, active, and lively atmosphere that nurtures spatial justice. They also play a role in offering 'eyes on the streets' (Jacobs, 1961) in this district with poorer social public order. In line with the argument of Adama (2020), while working, street vendors create informal relations and networks to overcome life challenges (Adama, 2020). They make the public spaces inviting and safe during nighttime, transforming traffic corridors into public spaces, thereby extending the use of the streets and facilitating its vitality.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Even though street vendors contribute to the production of new kinds of public spaces that broaden the definition of which, governments, unfortunately, seldom acknowledge their significance. As space is a dynamic mix of order and chaos, a more inclusive understanding of street vending – a typical urban informality – is an important precondition for facilitating spatial justice in public spaces. In this context, the present study examines how street vendors in Sham Shui Po, Hong Kong are experiencing and practising their everyday practices through consciously or unconsciously appropriating public spaces, often demonstrating care for their surroundings and the people they serve. By looking into interactions that happened in vending streets, the research reiterated the indispensable roles street vending has played in everyday life of less wealthy people of the territory. We acknowledged the role of vendors in the appropriation and vitalisation of public spaces and argued that street vending confirms the liminality of streets – as space for mobility, for the market, and for social communication and human-object interaction.

Yet, in line with previous claims (Kinoshita, 2001), maintaining proper public hygiene is still a critical issue in the vending street. Care should be taken into consideration to ensure that the vendor's grounding claims to livelihood through favourable or sympathetic policies. Reasonable, supportive, flexible and projective policies towards street vending, as well as the collective efforts by policymakers, law-executors, and urban designers, can bring a more inclusive approach to the operational dynamics of street vending. A follow-up in-depth interview with both the hawkers and the public appeared in the street to understand their needs, motivations and perspectives, could offer new insights to decipher their behaviour, so as to better integrate the notion of care into urban design and relevant policy-making.

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