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Title: Product¹ gentrification and its implications for consumers and communities.

Structured abstract

Purpose

Gentrification refers to the process by which previously deprived neighbourhoods experience economic and cultural development, and the in-migration of an affluent middle- and uppermiddle-class population. The present paper introduces the concept of product gentrification, a previously unexplored dimension of the gentrification phenomenon. Our main research aims are to: a) to define and conceptualise the notion, b) identify its main consequences for consumers, companies and communities and c) describe the distinct processes of industry led and market led gentrification.

Design/methodology/approach

In the present paper, we adopt a case study approach and present three illustrative vignettes of three gentrified consumer offerings (Thrift stores, Comi-con events and Korean kimchi). The three vignettes were developed using both secondary (literature, case studies) and primary data (30 face to face interviews). Although the three vignettes are used for illustrative purposes, they offer useful insight on the newly introduced concept.

Findings

Our findings confirm the proposed framework on how the product gentrification process occurs and identify its main consequences, i.e. higher prices that exclude traditional buyers, cultural appropriation, reinforced neighbourhood gentrification and capacity-demand imbalances.

Originality

To our knowledge, our paper is the first to introduce and comprehensively conceptualise the very important phenomenon of product gentrification.

¹ In the present study we use the term *product* as defined by Kotler and Keller (2007, p. 178), i.e. “*something that is offered to the target market to satisfy a want or a need*”. This conceptualisation includes both tangible products and intangible services. In this paper, therefore, we will refer to the gentrification of both tangible products and intangible services as *Product Gentrification*.

Social implications

This research has important implications for companies and policymakers, as it highlights how market and social forces enable, or even drive, product gentrification. It also offers insight on how its negative societal implications can be mitigated.

Keywords: Product gentrification, society, consumer behaviour

1. Introduction

Since its introduction by sociologist Ruth Glass in the 60s, the concept of gentrification has been a prominent subject of debate in academic research, sociological analysis and public discourse (Slater, 2011). Gentrification is *“the process by which central urban neighbourhoods that have undergone disinvestments and economic decline experience a reversal, reinvestment, and the in-migration of a well-off middle- and upper-middle-class population.”* (Smith, 1998). Since the concept’s introduction, there has been a great number of studies in the fields of sociology, human geography and urban studies exploring the process of neighbourhood gentrification along its main drivers and its implications for communities (e.g. Henig, 1980; Atkinson, 2003; Brown-Saracino, 2017). In general, although there are some arguments to support its positive impact in preventing segregation and upgrading the quality of life of local communities (Steinmetz et al, 2017), most scholars agree that gentrification is a very controversial phenomenon that can cause population displacement, class change, income polarisation, disruption of social cohesion and several other social issues (Levine, 2004; Paton, 2016; Hwang & Sampson, 2014).

Although market driven gentrification has been analysed thoroughly in the literature (Shaw, 2008; Andersson & Turner, 2014), the phenomenon has very rarely been elaborated from a consumption or marketing perspective. In fact, although a wide variety of studies exist on how the process of gentrification occurs in urban areas and on its societal consequences, yet to our knowledge there is little to no evidence on how the equivalent process happens in products and services. This is unexpected because there is a plethora of evidence in the marketing literature indicating that such analysis could prove useful in understanding aspects of gentrification relating to product and service consumption. For instance, research on the influence of class on taste and consumption indicates that members of the so called “hipster culture” develop consumption preferences motivated by a need to break out from their middle class, suburbanite lifestyles and to keep a reflexive distance from the general public (Arsel and Thompson, 2011). This tendency results in these middle-class consumers buying products and services traditionally purchased by lower class, less affluent consumers, driven by a *“desire to challenge deadening conformity and escape the ordinar”* (Kravets & Sandikci, 2014, p. 137). At the same time, research on trickle-up effects suggests that products and services are many times initially preferred by a niche group of low-income consumers and then gradually gain acceptance in the

larger market (Mohr, Fuxman & Mahmoud, 2022; Bellezza & Berger, 2020). Similarly, trickle-around effects refer to a phenomenon where consumption influence doesn't circulate in a straight line from higher end consumers to lower ones, but horizontally among communities or peers (Wo, Schminke & Ambrose, 2019).

In the present paper, we argue that these processes can be better understood and analysed under the theoretical lens of gentrification theory. We also argue that without the consumption element of gentrification, the concept is myopically viewed as a policy making related process that relates only to spatial re-configuration and population replacement. Drawing on theories from the gentrification and marketing fields we introduce, therefore, the new to the literature concept of **Product Gentrification**, which we define as “ *the process through which a product or service, traditionally purchased by lower socio-economic status communities or marginalized subcultures, gains popularity among middle- and upper-class, wealthier portions of the consumer market, resulting in changes in the product's characteristics and increased prices.* ” Product gentrification has occurred in a great number of products such as sport shoes (e.g. Converse All-stars) and automobiles (Mini, Lambrettas), retail services (e.g. Local farmer markets, thrift stores), cultural events (concerts, comic conventions) and many others. To investigate this newly introduced concept, the research aim of this paper is twofold: a) to conceptualise the notion of product gentrification and describe the mechanism by which it takes place b) identify its main consequences for consumers and communities.

In the following sections of this paper, we will present literature on gentrification deriving from sociology and urban theory. After that, we'll look at several examples of product gentrification and develop a holistic definition and conceptualization of the notion. We will then investigate its key consequences and validate our conclusions through the critical analysis and comparison of three recent product gentrification case studies. Finally, we will discuss how businesses, consumers and communities should view and/or respond to the phenomenon.

2. Literature review

2.1 Neighbourhood gentrification

Gentrification is a term firstly introduced by Ruth Glass in the mid 60s (Atkinson, 2003) to describe a complex phenomenon that includes significant socioeconomic, cultural and physical changes in neighbourhoods (Marcuse, 2016). It has been characterised as a "profit-driven race and class reconfiguration" or a colonialization process by important community-based

organizations and impacted communities (Schnake-Mahl et al, 2020). According to Levine (2004, p.3), “*gentrification is a wider term that encompasses all evidence of urban renewal and renaissance, including commercial renewal and goes beyond strictly denoting urban succession in a city’s poor and declining residential neighbourhoods.*” Regardless of the approach followed in defining gentrification, most authors agree that working-class communities and specific minorities may experience economic and cultural isolation as a result of a gentrification process (e.g. Wacquant, 2008; Paton, 2016). Neighbourhood transformation deriving from gentrification can have several negative consequences, such income polarisation, social cohesion disruption and the displacement of culture, businesses, and political power (Hwang & Sampson, 2014). Specifically, with the arrival of a higher socioeconomic class population, housing prices and amenities rise, and the demographic, residential, social, cultural, and political backdrop of a neighbourhood shifts (Smith & LeFaivre, 1984). This process can be either driven by state intervention and policy making or market forces (Hackworth, 2002).

2.2 Product gentrification

Contrary to common perception, gentrification is not only a spatial concept related to housing and neighbourhoods (Staley, 2018). In the present paper, we argue that, apart from neighbourhoods, urban areas and whole cities, the process of refining something to make it look more polite and respectable so that it becomes attractive to larger segments of the population, has many times occurred to products and services (Buffel & Phillipson, 2019). Since the early 70s many cheap products consumed by groups of consumers who couldn’t afford more expensive solutions have been rebranded and repositioned to appeal to wider consumer audiences. For instance, relatively cheap sport shoes (sneakers), mostly wore by members of black communities in big US cities, were rebranded in order to attract more affluent middle- and upper- class people who were seeking to develop a more urban style (Brace-Govan & de Burgh-Woodman, 2008). One of the most prominent examples is, perhaps, the very successful Converse All-star brand, which used to be wore almost exclusively by basketball players, whereas now is one of the most popular pieces of clothing in the “hipster community” (Mackinney-Valentin, 2014). This led to this product being gentrified, as, according to Gunduz (2020), “*sneaker culture has the potential to unify race and break down racial hate if marketed and advertised correctly...but over recent years, the opposite has been true and sneakers have acted as an instrument to further divide, rather than unify, races.*” From news commentators claiming that sport shoes’ brands should not support causes like Black Lives Matter to white supremacists using a specific brand’s logo (i.e. New Balance) to identify each other, the

“gentrified” version of the sneaker culture has been recently brought in the epicentre of the political and social discourse on racial division (Popken, 2016).

Similarly, many locally produced services and products, traditionally sold to local communities due to their cultural characteristics and affordability (e.g. craft and microbrewery products, barbershops), have been now repositioned as a hip, post-modern alternative to big corporate brands. For example, Walker and Miller (2019) explain how the expansion of craft breweries in Portland both enabled and was enabled by the gentrification of specific neighbourhoods. Another indicative example relates to small or large events formerly attracting a very niche group of people who had very particular interests and preferences. Such events include specialised music concerts (e.g. Burning Man in Nevada), indie movies (Vienna International Film Festival), food and culture festivals (strEATlife festival in London) and “geek culture” related events (e.g. Comic-con). These events have now become parts of the popular culture and are being attended by all types of consumers (McCain, Gentile & Campbell, 2015; Shaw & Sullivan, 2011). At the same time, there are several accounts in the relevant literature of people who previously attended similar events being unable to pay or even find a ticket due to their increased popularity (Brooks, & Soulard, 2022). Similar arguments have been published about traditional farmer markets, such as the Kirkgate’s market in Leeds, where the gentrification process has resulted in higher prices, making fresh food products unaffordable for people who live near the markets (e.g. Leeds city centre) and traditionally bought their fresh food there (González and Waley, 2013). Other products that exhibit evidence of gentrification, as conceptualised in the current study, include automobile brands re-positioned to be hipster alternatives (e.g. Mini, Vespa), oriental food (e.g. kimchi, tacos), thrift and second hand shops, camping sites repositioned as luxury alternatives (glamping) and traditional local coffee shops (e.g. kafeneio in Greece). Table 1 depicts all examples of product gentrification found in the literature along with an evaluation of their impact in terms of the four identified consequences, based on theoretical arguments expressed in the literature.

After a careful examination of all the examples mentioned above, it can be argued that there are several indicators of product gentrification. The first one is that, similarly to neighbourhood gentrification (Smith & LeFaivre, 1984), a gentrified product or service is being redesigned and/or repositioned to become more attractive to middle class, wealthy consumer segments (e.g. sport shoes repositioned as urban clothes). Due to the different market positioning, in most cases, the price of the offering increases and its quality is being upgraded (le Grand, 2020).

Moreover, even when the main product identity remains the same, some of its characteristics are altered to be more congruent to the new customers' preferences. For example, glamping – a form of gentrified camping – still offers an alternative type of tourism that brings travellers closer to nature, but several of the services offered are different (e.g. the tent or shelter is already set up for the customers, each accommodation has its own heating or cooling facility) to fit tourists who were previously used to stay in appartement rooms and hotels (Boscoboinik & Bourquard, 2012). For the same reason, oriental street food, such as tacos and kimchi, is many times cooked in a more Western-style way than the original recipes (Newman & Newman, 2017).

Marketing scholars have offered useful insights on the reasons why such gentrification effects have occurred in products and services. Specifically, research on trickle up and trickle around effects has revealed that products and services traditionally consumed by lower income, lower class, or even marginalised groups of consumers, often become popular amongst more affluent, middle- and high-class consumers (Bellezza & Berger, 2022). The main reason for that, according to Kravets & Sandikci (2014) is that these consumers develop the desire to differentiate themselves from the rest of the middle-class consumers and, therefore, develop an alternative taste for specific products. In the present study, we argue that this newly develop taste doesn't always align completely with the original characteristics of these products. In many cases, these groups of consumers prefer a different – most frequently upgraded- version of the original product, both in terms of the product's features and its price (Brace-Govan & de Burgh-Woodman, 2008; Boscoboinik & Bourquard, 2012). We argue, therefore, that theory on trickle up and trickle around effects, albeit useful to understand the diffusion of these products in the market, doesn't adequately explain the changes on the products and the implications of these changes for the consumers who originally purchased the product and the communities they belong in (e.g. Kwon et al, 2021). Consequently, we consider product gentrification as a much more inclusive and explanatory concept and in the present study we argue that there are three major indicators of its occurrence, i.e. the altering of the product's or service's characteristics -usually leading to higher quality-, a substantial increase in the product's price and a different, wider consumer audience the product is addressed to. Integrating these three indicators, we define product gentrification as *“the process through which a product or service, traditionally purchased by lower socio-economic status communities or marginalized subcultures, gains popularity among middle- and upper-class, wealthier portions of the consumer market, resulting in changes in the product's characteristics and increased prices.”*

Table 1: Examples of product gentrification and their consequences

	<i>Sources</i>	<i>Higher prices that exclude traditional buyers</i>	<i>Cultural appropriation</i>	<i>Reinforces neighbourhood gentrification</i>	<i>Capacity-demand imbalances</i>
<i>Sport shoes (e.g. sneakers)</i>	Mackinney-Valentin (2014); Gunduz (2020)	High	High	Low	Low
<i>Local farmer markets</i>	González and Waley (2013)	High	Low	Medium	High
<i>Barbershops</i>	Barber (2016)	Medium	Medium	High	Medium
<i>Automobiles (e.g. Mini, Vespas, Lambrettas)</i>	Muñiz Jr, & Schau (2011)	High	Low	Low	Low
<i>Oriental street food (e.g. kimchi, tacos)</i>	Ly (2021); Kwon et al (2021)	High	High	Medium	Low
<i>Carnivals-Comi-con – Festivals</i>	McCain, Gentile & Campbell (2015); Brooks, & Soulard, (2022)	High	Medium	Low	High
<i>Craft Breweries</i>	Walker and Miller (2019)	High	Low	High	Medium
<i>Camping – Glamping</i>	Boscoboinik & Bourquard (2012)	High	Low	Low	Medium
<i>Thrift shops</i>	Nguyen, T. (2021)	High	Low	Medium	Medium
<i>Local cafes (e.g. Kafeneio)</i>	Felton (2018)	Medium	Low	Medium	Low

2.3 Consequences of product gentrification

Although product gentrification could be just viewed and analysed through the prism of traditional brand or product repositioning theories deriving from the scientific fields of marketing and consumer psychology (Muñiz & Schau, 2011; Cătălin, & Andreea, 2014), the phenomenon is clearly not just a strategic marketing process aiming to increase product sales. It resembles the neighbourhood gentrification process as it has similar implications for consumers, communities and society in general (Table 1). The first, and most obvious, negative

consequence of product gentrification is the substantial increase in the gentrified products' price. Similarly to the way gentrification raises home prices and rents in a neighbourhood (Guerrieri, Hartley, & Hurst, 2013), gentrified products and services are more expensive and, therefore, unaffordable for the people who used to buy them. For example, as Kristen Barber (2016) notes, in many Western countries traditional barbershops are now mostly found in middle class or gentrified neighbourhood and the price of the services are significantly higher than they used to be. This is because they have been repositioned as spaces for mostly white rich men who abide in the hipster subculture, either intentionally because entrepreneurs saw this opportunity in the market or unintentionally because they existed in neighbourhoods that were then gentrified (Barber, 2016).

Similar increase in prices has occurred with many music, art and food festivals, farmer markets, thrift shops and coffee shops (Brooks, & Soulard, 2022; Ronobir, Curran, Kaushal & Yazdani, 2020). From a marketing perspective, this is happening because a significant number of consumers are willing to pay a premium price for the product or service and, hence, the providers adjust the price without considering that they may lose some of their traditional customers (Anselmsson, Bondesson & Johansson, 2014). In fact, for some gentrified products and services there is nowadays an urban expression that characterises them as "Hipster expensive", i.e. *"a product that is more expensive than such an item really should be, often with a seemingly arbitrary price."* (urbandictionary.com).

Another negative impact of product gentrification is the potential for cultural appropriation it entails. The most telling example is food gentrification, as defined by feminist writer Mikki Kendall: *"the appropriation of cultural food items by the market and by mainstream customers, with the risk of increasing food prices and excluding traditional users from purchasing and using those items."* (Anguelovski, 2015b). In many of these cases, the adoption of food-related cultural practices and culturally valuable food that is being appropriated by western cultured, privileged consumers, not only makes the food and cooking process more expensive, but it may also evoke feelings of alienation and resentment in the relevant communities, especially if the food's taste changes to accommodate the new customers' preferences.

Thompson and Haytko (1997) look at how consumers navigate competing cultural narratives that go from dream to reality, from autonomy to belonging, and from resistance to conformity, all while negotiating personal sovereignty and constructing identities. Another example of how product gentrification can create feelings of threat and distress is the adoption of urban style

sport shoes (e.g. sneakers), (Wharton, 2008). Sneakers and other streetwear were traditionally wore by people living in urban, deprived neighbourhood and were particularly popular amongst black communities. The process of commercialising the culture and fashion of these communities has often been described as subject to modern forms of colonisation and cultural commodification (Törnberg, & Chiappini, 2020).

Apart from the aforementioned problems, product gentrification might also result in a capacity-demand imbalance, which can lead to poor service provision and reduced customer satisfaction. One example pertains to the gentrification of events which historically were addressed to individuals within specific subcultures such as bohemian (e.g. Burning man), geek (e.g. Comicon) and alternative rock music (e.g. Glastonbury). Many of these events have been repositioned to attract wider audiences that don't belong to the aforementioned sub-cultures and subsequently become very popular to these audiences. This has resulted in original members of the subcultures not being able to attend such events due to limited capacity or even if they manage to find tickets to the events to enjoy them less due to overcrowded spaces, polluted areas etc (Brooks, & Soulard, 2022). Furthermore, the gentrification of such events has led to increased popularity in new types of travellers with less sustainable behaviour, bringing all the negative consequences of overtourism (Gössling, McCabe & Chen, 2020). Another example of the capacity-demand imbalance caused by product gentrification relates to local farmer markets and thrift shops, that have now attracted a much larger population visiting them (Le Zotte, 2017), making the experience less enjoyable because of overcrowding, low availability of products and hindered quality of goods.

Finally, another consequence of product gentrification relates to its interplay with neighbourhood gentrification. Specifically, evidence from the literature suggests that product gentrification can lead to spatial gentrification and vice versa, since modern forms of gentrification tend to be consumption-oriented (Mullenbach & Baker, 2005). For example, the gentrification of products and services like oriental street food, barbershops, flea markets etc has been a prominent reason why areas such as Shoreditch and Brixton in East London have been gentrified (Hubbard, 2018). Sometimes it is very difficult to infer direct causality between neighbourhood gentrification and customer services' gentrification, still it is clear that these two are related and in occasions this may have a positive effect. Walker and Fox Miller (2019), for instance, explored the relationship between the expansion of the craft breweries industry and the neighbourhood gentrification process in Portland. They concluded that not only the two

are related, but also the fact that the industry's flourishing had a positive impact by "cultivating an air of authenticity" to local bars, pubs and restaurant. In Table 1, we have included an evaluation of the degree to which each of the four potential consequences we analysed has occurred for each of the ten products/services we identified as gentrified. Our evaluation is based on case studies and arguments we found in the literature on the consequences of the gentrification of each product/service.

It is possible to argue that product gentrification, as defined in this paper, has also benefits for customers and communities. Firstly, gentrified products and services tend to be of higher quality, at least in terms of technical characteristics. Furthermore, gentrification of a product can sometimes increase its appeal, making the group of people who originally used it appear cooler or even become more socially accepted (Runyan, Noh & Mosier, 2013). For example, it can be argued that the gentrification of "geek culture" events (e.g. Comi-con) has increased the popularity of the specific culture and has therefore improved the image of a previously marginalised community (Gilbert, 2017). In addition, gentrified products like sneakers or services like traditional barbershops, that originate from urban black neighbourhoods and communities, improve living in these areas and hence prevent further segregation (Andersson & Turner, 2014; Mordechay, Ayscue & Orfield, 2017). Without disregarding the positive implications of product gentrification, as explained in previous sections, in the present paper we argue that these always come with a price, especially for the consumers and communities that traditionally were buying these offerings (e.g. unaffordable products, cultural appropriation, unavailability of services).

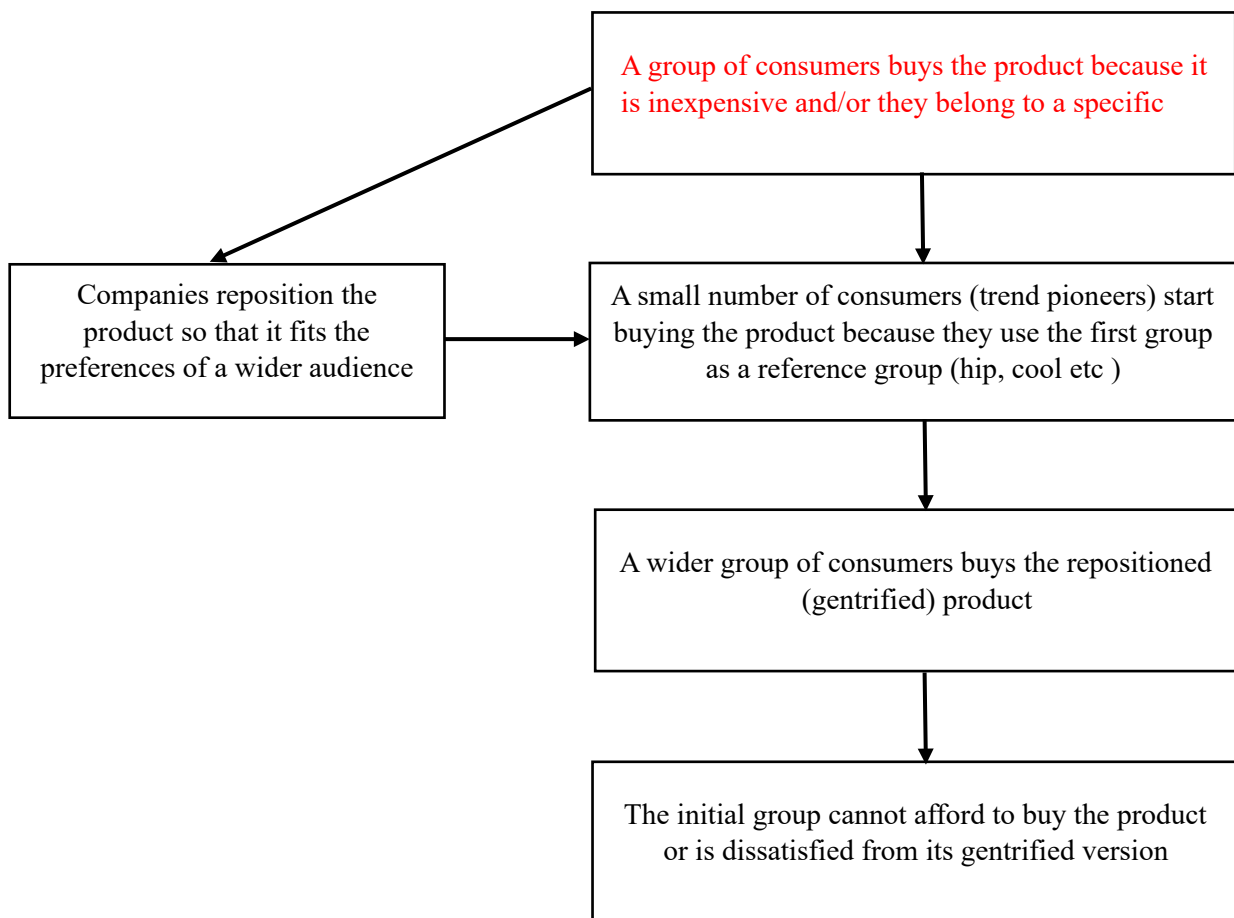
2.4 The process of product gentrification

According to Philip L. Clay (1979), neighbourhood gentrification happens in four stages (Henig, 1980): a) previously deprived neighbourhoods first attract artists, musicians and people with bohemian lifestyle due to cheaper rents, b) middle class people follow due to their interest in arts and culture, c) the original population of the areas are displaced due to increases in rent and cost of living and d) the areas are fully exploited by bankers, real estate companies and rich home owners. This conceptualisation is very accurate for gentrification driven purely by market forces. However, gentrification frequently occurs as a result of governments' and policy makers' action, either partially or completely (e.g. Lees, 2000). Government intervention can take various forms. It can serve as a reinforcement to developer-driven gentrification, e.g. at the Spring Green neighbourhood in Philadelphia (Beauregard, 1990), through the development

of flexible regulations for the replacement of existing public units with new private modern ones, public investment in developing mixed-income buildings (Levine, 2004). Alternatively, it can also be the sole engine for gentrification through a formal government plan for building construction and neighbourhood improvement, as happened in Sulukule neighbourhood in Istanbul (Kocabas & Gibson, 2011).

A careful review of the literature on the products and services we consider gentrified (table 1), indicates that the process of product gentrification, as defined in this research, is not unlike to that of neighbourhood gentrification, with the notable exception that, instead of policy makers' actions, companies' intervention frequently occurs. In fact, in all cases, the two main forces that drive product gentrification seem to be consumer/market related, and industry induced. On this basis, in the present study we propose that the gentrification of a product or service involves 5 stages (Figure 1): a) a group of consumers buys the product because it is inexpensive and/or they belong to a specific sub-culture, b) another group consumers (trend pioneers) starts buying the product because they use the first group as a reference group (find them hip, cool etc), c) companies reposition the product in order to fit the preferences of a wider audience, d) a wider group of consumers buys the repositioned (gentrified) product and e) the initial group of consumers cannot afford to buy the product or is dissatisfied from its gentrified version.

Figure 1: *The product gentrification process*



As in neighbourhood gentrification, the first stage of product gentrification involves a number of consumers purchasing the product because it's affordable and/or because they are members of the community that has been traditionally buying it (e.g. tourists going camping or working class people buying vespas in the 50s because they are cheap alternatives). In the next stage of the gentrification, a usually small group of trend pioneers also adopts the product because they aspire to look and feel like the original group. In the second stage of a product gentrification process, when the first group of fashion and lifestyle pioneers are drawn to products that, albeit inexpensive and not necessarily of high quality, are being used by groups of people they considered cool. For sneakers this group was mostly black athletes and artists living in urban neighbourhoods (Brace-Govan & de Burgh-Woodman, 2008), for craft breweries and microbreweries it was alternative lifestyle beer aficionados (Graefe, Mowen & Graefe, 2018), for Vespas and Lambrettas in the UK, the initial buyers were the working-class members of the Mod movement in the 50s' (Weight, 2013) and for glamping it was the young, nature loving, low income camping tourists (Boscoboinik & Bourquard, 2012). The original group of

consumers bought the product/service because of its affordability and/or because they belonged to a specific culture and the first trend pioneers because they sought to appear and feel like the original group. The third step of the gentrification process entails a rise in the popularity of the product among a wider segment of customers. This stage occurs due to consumer-driven processes, industry-driven strategies or both. In product gentrification, the first group who usually are trend setters, or even opinion leaders, in the subjects of fashion, entertainment etc, make the product popular to the larger market (Myers & Robertson, 1972; Runyan et al, 2013). This creates a trickle around effect, as the more people start buying a specific product the more possible it is for this product to be desired and purchased by other consumers (Smith et al, 2007).

At the same time, the increase in the product's popularity is many times initiated or facilitated by some producers' product repositioning strategy. Such repositioning may involve the strategic choice to change some of its characteristics in order to appeal to the mainstream market, maintaining at the same time the core identity of the brand (Beverland, & Ewing; 2005). Such decisions eventually result in increased sales and profit, but at the same time cause a rise in the repositioned product's production cost and price (Kaul & Rao, 1995). In the final stage of a product's gentrification, the offering's price has increased and/or its attributes have been altered to fit mainstream consumer preferences and therefore all the negative consequences of gentrification, as described in the previous section are more likely to occur. The last stage of the gentrification process is what differentiates product gentrification from a simple trickle up effect, where a product becomes popular amongst more affluent, middle- and high-class consumers without a product repositioning or significant changes in the product's characteristics (Bellezza & Berger, 2022).

3. Current vignettes

3.1 Method

Aiming to implement the framework we proposed for capturing the product gentrification process and explore the validity of our arguments on its consequences, we developed three vignettes, one on a gentrified product, one for a gentrified service and one for a gentrified event. According to Loo (2002), vignettes are short narratives presenting key information about a situation and can many times be used to describe the stages of a process. As a research methodology, they are part of the case study research approach, which is an approach followed

for theoretical rather than statistical purposes (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In our paper, we follow this approach with the goal of providing a clearer picture of how our theoretical ideas could be applied in a real-world context. (Siggelkow, 2007). As a technique, case study research has the ability to secure rich descriptions, and while illustrative cases have limitations in terms of generalizability and representativeness, Yin (1994) argues they are generalizable to theory and not to populations. The three cases of product gentrification we chose for our three vignettes were a) thrift shops, b) comic conventions (comic-cons) and c) Korean dish kimchi.

The three vignettes were selected for two reasons: i) all three “products” have undergone through the process of gentrification as defined in our study and ii) they are case studies that have not been explored and analysed thoroughly in the current literature and hence our study’s contribution to the current academic discourse is enhanced. We chose three different types of offering (i.e. a retail service, an event and a tangible product) to make sure our conceptualisation is applied to a diverse range of consumer offerings. While the vignettes are primarily illustrative, they were selected and developed using established case study research principles aimed at theoretical rather than statistical generalization (Yin, 1994).

In order to develop the three vignettes, we used both secondary and primary data. The secondary data we used include published papers and case studies. The primary data we collected derived from 30 short, semi-structured interviews (10 for each vignette) with consumers who traditionally bought the three offerings before the latter were gentrified. Our sample of interviewees was selected purposively in order to increase our understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Suri, 2011) and to obtain useful information about the vignettes (Campbell et al, 2020). The interviews were carried out face to face by an experienced researcher who is a member of the current authors’ team. All participants were residents of the US or the UK at the time and the interviews were carried out in their country of residence. The interviews were short (20-25 minutes) and based on an interview guide that was designed by the lead researcher of this study. The participants were initially asked to describe their experience with thrift shops, comic-cons and kimchi and their involvement with them (e.g. how important shopping in a thrift store, attending a comic-con and buying kimchi is for them). For the third vignette we purposively chose 1st and 2nd generation migrants from Korea, so that we could examine and illustrate the cultural appropriation aspects of gentrification. Then they were asked questions about the changes that have happened in these three offerings over the years, their opinion about how these changes happened and their attitude towards these attitudes.

Finally, they were asked questions about the impact these changes had on them personally. Table 2 summarises our interviewees' profile, country of residence and the reason for inclusion in the study. All names used in table 2 are pseudonyms.

Table 2: *Profile of study participants*

Name	Sex	Age	Country of residence	Reason for being included in the sample
Linda	F	31	US	Shops frequently in thrift stores
Mary	F	43	US	Shops frequently in thrift stores
Said	M	31	US	Shops frequently in thrift stores
Hannah	F	23	US	Shops frequently in thrift stores
George	M	32	UK	Shops frequently in thrift stores
Ioanna	F	46	UK	Shops frequently in thrift stores
Goran	M	25	UK	Shops frequently in thrift stores
Steve	M	24	UK	Shops frequently in thrift stores
Iakovos	M	37	UK	Shops frequently in thrift stores
Anna	F	28	UK	Shops frequently in thrift stores
Maria	F	32	US	Frequent attendee in comic-cons for at least 5 years
Sameera	F	31	US	Frequent attendee in comic-cons for at least 5 years
Mo	M	42	US	Frequent attendee in comic-cons for at least 5 years
Nikos	M	27	US	Frequent attendee in comic-cons for at least 5 years
Gary	M	47	UK	Frequent attendee in comic-cons for at least 5 years
Martin	M	25	UK	Frequent attendee in comic-cons for at least 5 years
Kieran	M	32	UK	Frequent attendee in comic-cons for at least 5 years
Xiao	M	24	UK	Frequent attendee in comic-cons for at least 5 years
Iris	F	28	UK	Frequent attendee in comic-cons for at least 5 years
Tolkien	M	34	UK	Frequent attendee in comic-cons for at least 5 years
Kate	F	58	US	1 st generation Korean migrant – regular kimchi consumer
Josephine	F	52	US	1 st generation Korean migrant – regular kimchi consumer
Tina	F	49	US	1 st generation Korean migrant – regular kimchi consumer
Hope	F	23	US	2 nd generation Korean migrant – regular kimchi consumer
Sofia	F	29	US	2 nd generation Korean migrant – regular kimchi consumer
Antigoni	F	35	US	2 nd generation Korean migrant – regular kimchi consumer
Fiore	F	29	UK	2 nd generation Korean migrant – regular kimchi consumer
Apostolos	M	32	UK	2 nd generation Korean migrant – regular kimchi consumer
Ruth	F	23	UK	2 nd generation Korean migrant – regular kimchi consumer
Ghaith	M	24	UK	2 nd generation Korean migrant – regular kimchi consumer

Considering that our conceptualisation of product gentrification and its implication was founded on an extent literature review and the fact that the three vignettes are used to illustrate how these have occurred in practice, we chose to employ template analysis to process our interview data (Brooks et al, 2015). Template analysis is a thematic analysis technique in which themes that are initially extracted from the existing literature are used to structure the coding of the interviews (Round & Roper, 2017). In the present study, the coding of the interviews' content agreed with our conceptualisation of the product gentrification process, as well as the four preidentified consequences. The conceptual template we proposed served as a guide for the coding of all interview transcripts and was iteratively refined during an initial analysis phase. Coding was conducted manually by two researchers independently, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion to enhance inter-coder reliability. This process ensured that the analysis was not solely reliant on subjective interpretation but grounded in a replicable coding scheme derived from existing theory. In the end of the process no additional codes and themes were identified.

3.2 Vignette 1: Thrift stores

Thrifting refers to shopping in a second-hand shop, flea market, garage sale, or charitable organization's shop with the goal of finding unique products at a low cost (McCrohan, Smith & Adams, 1991; Yan, Bae & Xu, 2015). Traditionally, thrift shops attracted customers with low to very low disposable incomes such as students, single mothers, immigrants and minorities and provided them with access to products that they wouldn't otherwise buy (Le Zotte, 2017). The past few years, though, thrift shops are becoming increasingly popular, attracting more affluent customers who are willing to pay more for these second-hand products, a phenomenon that has recently been characterised in the public discourse as thrift store gentrification (Nguyen, T. 2021). After analysing the literature and our interviewees' observations, we argue that the gentrification of thrifting resembles a lot the stages of product gentrification we recommended in previous sections of our paper. Specifically, the first step of gentrification happened when thrift stores started to become cool among trend setters and followers (e.g. hipsters, "flippers") with higher disposable income (Mohr, Fuxman & Mahmoud, 2022) or among people following an alternative way of consumption that encourages recycling old products (Pentina & Amos, 2011).

Afterwards, when many of the shops recognised the increase in sales, they decided to increase their prices and even add more expensive, such as luxury brand cloths, to their stock (Reid,

2021). At the same time, a new practice of flipping used products by buying them from thrift shops and reselling them online in a higher price has emerged the last few years. In an effort to legitimize their activities and increase their price points, those who engage in this type of reselling have chosen to refer to themselves as "curators". Consequently, traditional thrift shops observe the rising demand for used goods, even online and that enables them to further increase their prices too (The appalachian, 2021) As one of our interviewees highlighted: *"You can actually see the vicious circle in this. The more expensive the online stuff become, the more profit the stores are trying to make."* At the final stage of the gentrification, the initial group of buyers are excluded from buying in thrift shops due to unaffordability. As Mohr, Fuxman & Mahmoud (2022) note, second-hand stores are now so popular amongst consumers who are newly engaging with the economy, making clothes and other goods out of reach for people in communities who may need them. This is confirmed by one of our interviewees, who shops in thrift shops more than 23 years (since he was a student), who said *"It doesn't even make sense to shop there anymore. It's cheaper to go to Primark."*

Apart from second-hand products becoming unaffordable, our interviews confirmed some of the other consequences of gentrification. Firstly, the gentrification of thrift shops creates demand-capacity issues, as people cannot find good products to buy because rich people or "flippers" buy them in bulk. As one of our interviewees mentioned *"It's impossible to find the good stuff. They have always been skimmed off."* Another noted that: *"You can find some cheap cloths and books, but mostly online and only if you look very hard. But others [products] have completely disappeared. Especially things like LP records and old accessories."* Furthermore, thrift shops are now, more often than not, located in gentrified and expensive neighbourhoods. This makes it difficult for poorer people to access them. As one of our interviewees, who is a single parent living in a deprived area in a major UK city, highlighted: *"You can find some [shops] that are still cheap, but they are not in the city centre. So, I very rarely visit them anymore."* At the same time, since the shops are now located in gentrified neighbourhoods in major cities, they are becoming a common attraction for locals and tourists, whose presence increases the prices of the products and sometimes makes marginalised people feel ashamed to even go there to shop. As one of our interviewees noted *"[The local thrift shop] feels like a Starbucks café."* This indicates that traditional thrift stores' visitors, who actually need to visit these stores for utilitarian reasons feel that they don't belong there anymore, a feeling that diminishes the initial and true purpose of these stores. It becomes apparent, therefore, that there

is a strong interplay between product and spatial gentrification; in the sense that one reinforces and amplifies the negative consequences for communities that the other has.

3.3 Vignette 2: Comic-Con

Comic book conventions, often known as a comic-cons, are events where comic book fans get together to interact with artists, specialists, and each other (Jenkins, 2012). According to Jenkins (2012), these events are something way more than comic book conventions; they are cultural events, trade fairs, collector's markets, public forums, academic conferences, and arts festivals all rolled into one. Comic-cons exist since the 60s, but as Woo et al (2020, p. 11) note *“they spent a long time in the wilderness, more likely to appear as the punchline to a joke about ‘pathological’ fans than as a place where ordinary folks might like to spend a weekend”*. Traditionally, the main group of people attending comic-cons were considered individuals that belonged in a marginalised subculture. It's only in the last 15-20 years that these events have become increasingly popular and are now an important part of the mainstream entertainment and cultural marketplace (Salkowitz, 2012). This is due to the immense success that Hollywood comic book blockbuster movies have enjoyed (e.g. Marvel and DC movies) and the *“the rise of the triumphal narrative of geek culture”* in general (Woo, 2018, p. 4).

In the present study, we argue that the increased popularity of comic-cons has also resulted in the gentrification of these events. The analysis of the ten interviews we conducted with people who have been visiting comic-cons more than 15 years led us to conclude that not only is this true but also the gentrification process followed the stages our study proposes. In this case, the initial group of people did not attend the events due to low prices, but due to their commitment to the comic book culture. As comic books started becoming more popular, new types of consumers started attending comic-cons, such as fans of TV series and movies, fashion and culture bloggers and pop culture enthusiasts. This resulted in the number of comic-cons being held all over the world to increase significantly and their prices to raise. At the same time, some of the features and characteristics of the events changed in order to appeal to mainstream audience. As one of our participants notes when asked what has changed the last 10 years in comic-cons: *“You get to see more a-list celebrities, the quality of the merchandising is much better but sometimes it feels that the atmosphere has become too commercial. Sometimes you feel you are in a mall or something.”* Consequently, it becomes evident that comic-cons have undergone changes that, while initially appearing to be an improvement, this is not how they are perceived by traditional attendees.

As far as the consequences of comic-cons' gentrification is concerned, increased prices were mentioned by all our interviewees. In fact, half of our interviewees said that attending the events has become almost impossible for them or as one participant put it: *"The only reason I managed to go to the London comic-con this year is that I saved some money the last two years because of the pandemic lockdown"*. Moreover, even while some other people can still afford to attend the events, rising ticket prices forced them to reduce the amount of money they spent at the events on merchandise, autographs, etc. As one of our participants, who has been collecting autographs in comic-cons for the last 15 years, mentioned: *"I will always go [to comic-cons] but I think I have given up on the collection. There is no way I will be able to do it in the future."* Another impact comic-con's gentrification relates to the lack of availability of tickets due to increased demand. Several of our participants highlighted the extra pain of pre-registering for the events or being alert of the tickets release dates, so they can book their tickets in the first few hours. One interviewee, who lives in New York, said that for the New York comic-con, even if you pre-register and you try to buy tickets the first few minutes that their released is announced, you may end up not being able to find the ones you were looking for.

Finally, several interviewees also mentioned the (mis)appropriation of the "Geek" subculture as one of the issues that comic-growing con's popularity has brought, which is in line with our conceptualization of gentrification repercussions. There was a consensus amongst our interviewees that newcomers have altered the atmosphere in comic-cons, making it more mainstream than they would prefer. One participant said: *"They don't even care about comic books. You could as well have a Rambo impersonator in the room and they will still ask for photos with him!"*. Another interviewee said: *"It's all about the movies nowadays. But that's 30 year old stuff. What about the new comics? The new characters? No one cares about them anymore."* Some of them, on the other hand, pointed out their appreciation of the demarginalization comic-cons' popularity has brought. One of our participants, for instance, noted that: *"It's a breath of fresh air to talk to people about having been to comic-con and being asked questions instead of being made fun of"*. This view is consistent with previous authors who suggest that comic books becoming mainstream has helped previously marginalized members of the "Geek" community (Woo, 2018).

3.4 Vignette 3: Korean kimchi

Asian cuisines have been increasingly popular around the world and in Western countries in particular. This surge in popularity has had an immense impact on how Asian food is being

produced, promoted and sold in such countries, a process often described as gentrification in public discourse, which has left a discernible mark on the landscape of Asian food (Stock & Schmiz, 2019). One major example of an Asian food product that has been gentrified is Kimchi, a Korean side dish consisting of salted and fermented vegetables, most commonly napa cabbage or radish. It is rooted in Korean culture, symbolizing preservation and a connection to the seasons (Schino, 2011). In the last few years, its popularity has increased immensely worldwide, especially in Western metropolitan cities, largely due to its rebranding as a trendy, health-conscious food (Alkon, Cadji & Moore, 2022). As kimchi gained popularity in mainstream markets, its appearance and taste have changed to appeal to a wider range of consumers. The once modest, home-cooked side dish has further distanced itself from its genuine, handmade origins by being offered in slick, commercial packaging (Kwon et al, 2021). Based on the findings of the ten brief interviews we conducted with first- or second- generation Korean consumers in the US and the UK, we conclude that this transition process adhered to the stages our study suggests. One 2nd generation Korean American explained to us that *“in the last 10 years many Korean cultural products (e.g. Kpop, influencers, TV series) have become very popular here in the US. It was only natural that food would follow.”* Another identified the additional influence producers and brands had on the gentrification of the product by repositioning it to fit the preferences of wider audiences.

As he notes: *“Many kimchi brands (even Korean ones) have a different audience now. That’s why they change the ingredients, the package, even the recipes”.*

Our interviews revealed at least 3 out of our 4 proposed consequences of kimchi’s gentrification, the first and most prominent being its constantly rising price (Kwon et al, 2021). Due to this increase many traditional consumers find it overpriced or even unaffordable. All our interviewees agreed that the price of kimchi has significantly gone up the past few years and that has made them reconsider the frequency and amount they are buying it both in supermarkets and in restaurants. As one of our interviewees put it: *“I got tired of how expensive it is in the store. I am now just buying the stuff and making it on my own.”* Another interviewee emphasised that the increased prices are not only due to kimchi’s popularity, but also its revised version that includes fancy expensive ingredients. As she notes: *“Sometimes I get really annoyed when they see these new fancy [kimchi] recipes on TV. Some of them look tasty, but this is not what kimchi is all about. It should be simple and cheap.”* According to our respondents, kimchi’s (and Asian food’s in general) gentrification has also had an impact or

even initiated the transformation of many Asian neighbourhoods in Western cities (Alkon, Cadji & Moore, 2022). Many of these have now attracted many visitors for other parts of the city and have been transformed into upscale, trendy neighbourhoods. As one of the interviewees said: *“I like living in New Malden. It has become a very nice area to live, but the rents have gone up drastically also. I think all these new hip [Korean] restaurants have attracted too many visitors from the city.”*

Finally, the gentrification of Asian cuisine is a phenomenon that has long been associated with cultural appropriation that has been characterised as *“the white-washing of Asian food that results in inauthenticity and the all too common practice of not giving credit to Asian cultures where it’s due.”* (Ly, 2021). Kimchi was a simple and inexpensive vegetable dish that symbolized the Korean self-image, i.e. *“underdogs who, through hard work, rise in a world where the lazy, fat cats linger over big steaks”* (Walraven, 2013). According to some of our interviewees the new version of kimchi you find in supermarkets and restaurants in big metropolitan cities, no longer represents this self-image. As one of our interviewees notes: *“It’s not only about the taste. For me it’s our culture. How I grew up. Where I come from. Not only Korea, but my family too. We were very poor and sometimes it was the only thing we had to eat.”* The gentrification of traditional ethnic foods such as kimchi, leads to the absence of authenticity, not only on a practical level (the food doesn’t look or taste the same), but also on an existential level (i.e. people don’t feel authentic to themselves). This is confirmed from what one of the interviewees, -a 2nd generation migrant from Korea living in London- mentioned: *“When I eat it [the transformed version of kimchi] doesn’t feel Korean. Heck, I don’t even feel Korean for buying it.”*

4. Discussion

Gentrification is a phenomenon with imperative social implication that have been a subject of academic discussion in the fields of sociology, human geography and urban studies (e.g. Henig, 1980; Atkinson, 2003). Our study is the first to apply theories on gentrification on product and service consumption by introducing the concept of **Product Gentrification** and identifying its main consequences for consumers, companies and communities, as well as mapping the process product gentrification occurs. Our study contributes to the literature by expanding theoretical arguments and empirical results on neighbourhood gentrification in the fields of marketing and consumer psychology, offering in that way useful explanations on how previously unexplored consumer behaviours emerge.

Our study's first research aim is to conceptualise the notion of product gentrification and describe the mechanism by which it takes place. As illustrated in our three vignettes, products and services many times gain popularity in different consumer groups than the ones they were traditionally purchased. For instance, in the last 10-15 years comic-cons have attracted many new visitors that do not necessarily abide to the “geek culture” and thrift shops have become popular amongst consumers who don't really need second hand products that are sold in low prices. As we explained in our vignettes, in both cases this has resulted in higher prices for tickets and products both because the demand for the latter has increased significantly and because the characteristics of the products have been upgraded (e.g. better quality of merchandising, greater variety of products).

Moreover, our paper provides crucial insight into how the gentrification process of products works. Our conceptualization specifically shows that gentrification of products is fuelled by both consumer forces and corporate initiatives. Adoption of the product by trend setters who use the original purchasers as a benchmark in order to seem trendy, hip, or cool is one example of a consumer force (Park & Lessig, 1977; Runyan et al, 2013). They also include consumers who start buying the product or service because of its widening popularity, e.g. when the general public became interested in local farm markets and specialised events. On the other hand, companies' interventions include product repositioning strategies, quality upgrades and in some occasions new “broking” enterprises, as described in our thrift stores' case study. Understanding the gentrification process, is a crucial first step in understanding how product gentrification can happen in a more responsible and sustainable way, expanding in that way previous arguments in the literature on responsible gentrification (Wright, 2000).

Our study's second contribution focuses on a thorough analysis of the effects of gentrification on consumers and communities (2nd research aim). Specifically, we propose the existence of four main effects and illustrate them in three case studies: the rise in product prices that make them unaffordable for traditional consumers; the potential cultural appropriation it may entail; its relationship to neighbourhood gentrification; and the potential capacity-demand imbalances it may bring about. This finding contributes to marketing literature by synthesising key arguments and empirical research on “hipster culture” consumption (Karababa & Kjeldgaard, 2014; Michael, 2015), cultural appropriation (Suh, Hur & Davies, 2016), product repositioning (Cătălin, & Andreea, 2014) and social class related consumption (Doward, 2020) and offers a more holistic view on the consequences of the previously unexplored phenomenon of product

gentrification. In addition, it makes a contribution to the fields of sociology and urban studies because it is the first to point out the parallels and variations between the potential social effects of gentrification on both products and neighbourhoods.

Our paper has significant implications for companies and policy makers. First, our paper argues that product gentrification many times results in products and services of higher quality and in some cases contributes to specific subcultures become mainstream and normalised, helping in that way with the psychological and practical demarginalization of specific communities. This presents a valuable opportunity for businesses seeking to reposition their offerings as premium or higher quality. For instance, in the case of comic-cons, our participants clearly indicated their appreciation for certain upgraded features of the event (e.g. higher quality of merchandising) and they cherish the fact that the things they like have become fashionable. However, this upgraded quality can also have negative effects on their traditional customers, such as increase price and decreased availability of products and services. Businesses, like comic-con organisers, planning on growing their customer base while avoiding more complaints and customer dissatisfaction, will need to carefully strike a balance between repositioning their offerings responsibly and fulfilling consumer demand. They also need to make sure that product improvements align with sustainable business practices and market trends. This requires a very good knowledge of the market and potentially a significant investment in market research.

Another potential negative consequence of product gentrification identified in our research is cultural appropriation, as in the case of repositioned oriental food (e.g. kimchi). Supermarket and fast-food restaurants responsible for gentrifying oriental food (e.g. Kimchi) could upgrade its quality and price, without changing completely the original recipes these products are based on. They can take the historical and cultural significance of their products into consideration and maintain respect for the cultural origins, preserving authenticity in recipes and cultural representations. Similarly, policy makers responsible for spatial gentrification, such as property developers and city councils can use the findings of our study to understand how product gentrification can lead to neighbourhood transformation and develop plans for sustainable expansion of particular businesses (number of restaurants in a specific area, limit on available Airbnb rooms in a particular area, a cap in rentals etc).

5. Limitations and suggestions for future studies

Our study has specific limitations that offer useful suggestions for future studies. Firstly, this study is the first to introduce the concept of product gentrification using three main case studies and presenting several other examples where the phenomenon occurred. Future research should identify more indicators of product gentrification and additional examples to produce an even more holistic framework for the concept can be developed. Moreover, the present study is exploratory in nature and its three case studies were developed merely for illustrative purposes. Future researchers should follow more structured methodologies and empirically test our propositions using different research approaches (e.g. validation through focus groups, quantitative causal surveys). Finally, only a cursory analysis of the relationship between product and neighbourhood gentrification has been done in our paper. To completely comprehend the intricate relationship between the two phenomena, further research is required.

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