Final Project: Ethnic businesses in Somerville, MA

I. Introduction

According to the 2005-2009 American Community Survey, Somerville is one of the most densely populated and also one of the most ethnically-diverse cities in Massachusetts. Situated in Somerville is a wide range of local businesses that cater to both residents and visitors to the city. Of these local businesses, there are numerous ethnic businesses that serve this ethnically-diverse city, ranging from grocery shops, restaurants, travel agencies to beauty services.

Although numerous research studies have been conducted on ethnic businesses, such as the location of ethnic businesses in multicultural cities (Fong et al 2008), dynamics of social capital on the ethnic business (Deakins et al 2007) and even social hierarchy between staff in ethnic businesses and their customers (Agius & Lee 2006), there is a lack of research on the role of an ethnic business in its surrounding community, and not merely the ethnic community it purports to serve. Against the backdrop of the ethnically-diverse city of Somerville, this researcher seeks to understand the role and dynamics of an ethnic business and its surrounding community. In particular, this study also hopes to contribute to Project PERIS and support the work of Somerville Community Corporation by providing an understanding of the Somerville’s current dynamic environment, which may face impending changes with the introduction of the upcoming Green Line extension into Somerville.

II. Research question

This study discusses the role and dynamics of an ethnic business and its surrounding community by exploring how residents of the community utilize the services provided by such business. Using qualitative information, this study addresses the following research question and sub-questions:

- What are the roles of the local ethnic business in Somerville? How do they serve the community? To what extent are local ethnic businesses embedded in Somerville?
  a. What are the services and/or goods provided by these businesses?
  b. What is the level of consumption of these services and/or goods by their customers?
c. What is the profile of the customers of these businesses? Do non-members of the ethnic community patronize these businesses?

d. Why do customers patronize these businesses? How far do customers travel to reach these businesses?

e. Are the customers able to obtain the same services and/or goods by non-ethnic businesses?

III. Methodology

A. Study setting

Somerville is a city located in Middlesex County, Massachusetts, with a population of 75,880 (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). It is one of the most densely populated and also one of the most ethnically-diverse cities in Massachusetts, where at least 23% of the population identify themselves as being of non-white origin (U.S. Census Bureau 2009) and more than 50 languages are spoken in the schools in Somerville (City of Somerville, 2011). The city of Somerville describes itself as “an eclectic mix of blue-collar families, young professionals, college students and recent immigrants from countries as diverse as El Salvador, Haiti, and Brazil” (ibid).

Situated in Somerville are a wide range of local business, including 179 food services and drinking places and 52 food and beverage stores in Somerville (U.S. Census Bureau Economic Census 2007). Of these local businesses, there are numerous ethnic businesses that and serve this ethnically-diverse city, ranging from grocery shops, restaurants, travel agencies to beauty services. Unfortunately the U.S. Census Bureau does not provide any data on the ethnicity or race of business owners¹.

A mixed method research study was designed to answer the research questions through the exploration of a case study in Somerville. Specifically, this study focuses on ethnic grocery shops, which provide an essential food and beverage retail service that its residents will have regular contact with, as compared

¹ This category of data pertaining to Somerville, MA was indicted with a “S” in the 2007 Survey of Business Owners (Release Date: 4/26/2011), which means that the data was “withheld because estimate did not meet publication standards”.

to other ethnic businesses, such as a travel agency or construction company, which may not be regularly patronized by members of the community.

At the commencement of this study, several grocery shops in the Union Square area of Somerville were identified as potential case studies, namely Bombay Market (Indian), La Internacional Foods Corporation (Central American and Caribbean), Reliable Market (Korean and Japanese), and International Market (South American) (Figure 1). Given that each grocery store purported to sell ethnic goods of different origins, it was necessary to ensure that the selected grocery store for this study had characteristics that were representative of other ethnic grocery stores. It was also necessary for this researcher to obtain the consent of the store owner to conduct the study. On this basis, this researcher selected a small grocery store that provided ethnic Brazilian food, Pão de Açúcar, located at 57 Union Square, Somerville, MA.

![Figure 1. Locations of ethnic grocery stores on the map of Union Square, Somerville, MA.](image-url)
B. Study design, data collection and data analysis

i. Study design and data collection

To effectively explore the research question, the following methods were utilized to collect the necessary data (Figure 2):

1. Observation & photographic analysis
   a. Observations were made of the business, including the location, customer traffic, shop layout and range of products sold. Observations were conducted for 2 sessions on a weekday afternoon (Tuesday, May 3, 2011) and a weekend afternoon (Saturday, May 7, 2011) for 1 hour each between 2:00 to 3:00 pm.
   b. Maps of the area were analyzed for the actual and relative location of the business to other businesses in the area (Figure 1).
   c. Photographs that were taken of the exterior and interior of the business were analyzed (Appendix B). These photographs were taken on Sunday, April 24, 2011.

2. Interviews
   a. Interviews were conducted with a purposive sampling of the business owner/staff (1 interviewee) and customers (5 interviewees).
   b. The interviews were designed with guidance from Bradburn’s Asking Questions (2004) which took note of the question type and subject. The interviews were conducted using short open-ended semi-structured questions (Appendix A).
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<th>Subsets of the Research Question</th>
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<th>Interviews</th>
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<td>What are the services and/or goods provided by the business?</td>
<td>Photography &amp; observation of goods sold &amp; services provided</td>
<td>Interviews with business owner/staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the level of consumption of the services and/or goods by the community?</td>
<td></td>
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<td>What is the profile of the customers of the business? Do non-members of the ethnic community patronize the business?</td>
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<td>Why do customers patronize the business? How far do customers travel to reach the business?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are the customers able to obtain the same services and/or goods by non-ethnic businesses?</td>
<td>Analysis of maps of the area.</td>
<td>Interviews with customers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2. Application of methods to research question.**

*ii. Data analysis*

As this is a mixed method research study, methodological triangulation (Gaber and Gaber, 2007) was used to increase the reliability of the data obtained through the methods outlined above. Observations made by this researcher were triangulated against the information obtained through the interviews. The collected data was also triangulated against publically available data from the US Census Bureau.

Using a bricolage approach (Kvale, 2007), the analysis of the information obtained through the interviews will focus on both language and meaning. This researcher is also sensitive to the fact that English may not be the first language of the interviewees, which was taken into account during the data collection and subsequent analysis.
III. Results

A. What are the services and/or goods provided?

Pão de Açúcar is a Brazilian grocery store owned by Brazilian migrants, which was set up 5 years ago in the location of a former Portuguese shop. Through observations and the interview with the owner, Francisco [last name unknown], the store provides a wide range of goods and services (Appendix B) such as groceries of Brazilian origin such as baked goods, spices, and fresh produce; groceries of non-Brazilian origin; assortment of goods such as CDs, DVDs, sporting equipment, clothing, and religious items; an in-house cafe/restaurant; locksmith services; and money transfers. Given that Brazil as a nation is a multicultural society, it was no surprise that some of the items imported from Brazil were manufactured by a Brazilian-Japanese family run company, Yoki Alimentos S.A. Some of the goods were of non-Brazilian origin and imported from Thailand, China, etc or manufactured in the United States (Appendix B, Photographs 6a, 6b and 6c).

Given that the store is extremely small, the owners utilized a very efficient store layout to display the wide range of goods and services (Figure 3).
B. What is the level of consumption of these services and/or goods?

According to the owner, Francisco, the most popular products in his store were the Brazilian groceries, followed by the Brazilian buffet and food takeaway.

Based on the observation of this researcher from 2.00 to 3.00 p.m., she observed 8 customers on Tuesday, May 3, and 11 customers on Sunday, May 7. On average, each customer purchased only between 3 to 5 items of groceries with a total cost of less than $20. One customer was there on Sunday, May 7, just to purchase a Brazilian Portuguese language newspaper (Appendix B, Photograph 5c). There was also one customer who duplicated keys on Tuesday, May 3 (Appendix B, Photograph 4a). Only 3 customers ordered food from the in-house café on Sunday, May 7, which is could have been due to the timing of the observation.

C. What is the profile of the customers of these businesses?

“Everyone shops here- Americans, Brazilians, Mexicans, so many people.” – Francisco, Owner

The typical customer is a resident of Somerville of Brazilian ethnicity who lives within walking distance to the store. In the interview with the owner, Francisco, his customers belonged to the following categories:

1. Residents of Somerville (of both Brazilian and non-Brazilian origins) who live within walking distance; and
2. Non-residents of Somerville who drive to his store to look for specific Brazilian products.

Based on the interviews of researcher of 6 customers, 5 out of the 6 customers interviewed fell within the first category of Somerville residents. 1 interviewee had driven from Ball Square, where he lives to shop at Pão de Açucar.

As for the reasons on why the shop at Pão de Açucar, some of the reasons included:

“I live just across the street and it is easy for me to come here.”
“It’s not as cheap as Market Basket, but I like the variety. I buy my other groceries at Market Basket and come here just for special Brazilian products.”

“I like to come here on Sundays when I’m not working. It reminds me of home when I hear everyone speaking Portuguese.”

It was interesting to note that a common observation by the customers was that prices in Pão de Açucar were higher than that of the nearby large supermarket, Market Basket, but continued to patronize Pão de Açucar for the convenience and variety of Brazilian goods. One interviewee noted that there were a few other Brazilian ethnic grocery or convenience stores in the area, but they did not offer a similar variety of goods.

The final theme that emerged from the interviews was the sense of community when customers visit Pão de Açucar. Customers noted that the smell and sight of goods reminded them of home. It was also a convenient place in the middle of Union Square, Somerville, to meet up with other members of the Brazilian community.

It was unfortunate that during the two observation sessions, the researcher did not manage to interview a customer who was not of Brazilian origin.

**IV. Research limitations**

As this research study only explored the dynamics of one ethnic grocery shop and care was taken that this store, Pão de Açucar, had representative characteristics of other ethnic grocery stores, the risk remains that the findings of this study does not represent all ethnic stores. In particular, Pão de Açucar has an in-house cafe/restaurant on its grounds, which may have affected the customer profile of the shop. The failure to interview a customer who was not of Brazilian origin has affected the representativeness of this research study, where this researcher had hoped to gain the insight of a non-Brazilian customer and motivations to visit the store.

This researcher is not a member of the Brazilian community and may not be aware of the specific cultural context or interests. English is not the first language of some members of the community, which may have affected the quality of the interviews. These language and cultural limitations can be
overcome in by conducting future interviews in the native language of the interviewees as well as using multiple interviewers to avoid personal bias.

Some of the questions posed to the owner during the interview appeared to touch on sensitive trade information, which led to vague responses by the business owner, especially on the customer profile and level of consumption of products and services.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

“It is important not to cater only to the Brazilian community, we cater to everyone.”

– Francisco, Owner

Based on the customer interviews, the customers noted that specific goods of Brazilian origin were difficult to obtain in a non-ethnic grocery store. Although there are other ethnic grocery stores in the Union Square area (Figure 1), they catered primarily to other ethnic communities and do not carry the same range of goods of Brazilian origin.

More notably, customers interviewed actually perceived the store to be an integral part of the Brazilian community in Somerville, where they could purchase Brazilian products and even meet other members of the Brazilian community. The store appeared to provide a “home away from home” for Brazilian migrants who may experience a longing for Brazilian goods and a taste of home. Of the 6 interviewed customers, all of them identified themselves as Brazilian, and according to the owner, there is also a sizable number of non-Brazilian customers. This researcher understands from the owner that these non-Brazilian customers are usually curious and would like to explore new products and services. The owner also emphasized that the success of the store was due in part to the fact that the store did not only cater to customers of Brazilian origin, but customers who may not be of Brazilian origin as well.

As for the reliability and validity of methods, although this researcher only managed to visit the store four times (of which two were for observations), this researcher is confident of the consistency of the observation of the products and services offered by the store. However, given the limitations listed above relating to the interviews, it is difficult to conclude whether a different researcher may have arrived at different interview results.
Nonetheless, despite the research limitations, it is hoped that this research study will provide a useful glimpse into the dynamics of an ethnic retail store and provide a better understanding of the roles of ethnic businesses to its immediate surroundings and not only to members of its ethnic community. This researcher also recommends further research can be conducted on other ethnic grocery stores in the Somerville area with a cross-comparison of data obtained.

References

Appendix A

Instrument: Survey Questions for Owner/Staff of Ethnic Business

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Questions for Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Objective: Introduction and general information                                   | [Introduction and explanation of project by this researcher. Consent was also sought.]  
1. What is your name and position at this store? How long have you been working here?  
2. Do you know how long this store has been operating in Union Square?               |
| What are the services and/or goods provided by the business?                      | 3. Your store offers a wide range of items ranging from food to household items. What are the products and services offered by your store?  
4. What are the most popular products and services?                                 |
| What is the level of consumption of the services and/or goods by the community?   | 5. I noticed that some of your products are not made in Brazil or South America. Are these common products purchased by your customers? Are these products popular with your customers? |
| What is the profile of the customers of the business? Do non-members of the ethnic community patronize the business? | 6. In general, what type of customers do you have? What are their ages, gender, nationality and languages spoken?  
7. Are your customers mostly of Brazilian or South American ethnicity?  
Roughly what proportions of your customers are from these ethnic groups?  
8. Do members who are not of these ethnicities come to your store? If so, what products and services do they purchase? |
| Why do customers patronize the business? How far do customers travel to reach the business? | 9. Do you know where your customers come from? Do they live in Somerville?  
10. Do you have customers who live outside Somerville and travel a long distance to get here? |
| Are the customers able to obtain the same services and/or goods by non-ethnic businesses? | (This may be a sensitive question and will only be asked if the interviewee is not threatened.)  
11. Do you think it is possible for your customers to get these services in other grocery stores? |
## Instrument: Survey Questions for Customers

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| Objective: Introduction and general information                                   | [Introduction and explanation of project by this researcher. Consent was also sought.]
|                                                                                  | 1. Do you live around this area? Are you a resident of Somerville?                                                                                                                                                    |
| What are the services and/or goods provided by the business?                      | 2. How often do you visit this store?                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|                                                                                  | 3. What do you normally purchase when you come here?                                                                                                                                                                    |
|                                                                                  | 4. Roughly how much do you spend for each visit? Less than $20? More than $20? Between $20 and $50?                                                                                                                        |
| What is the level of consumption of the services and/or goods by the community?    | (To establish basic information, but only if interviewee is agreeable. These questions will be asked at the end of the survey.)                                                                                           |
|                                                                                  | 5. If you don’t mind, can you please tell me your age?                                                                                                                                                                 |
|                                                                                  | 6. Do you identify yourself as a member of the Brazilian community? Or other South American community?                                                                                                                  |
| Why do customers patronize the business? How far do customers travel to reach the business? | 7. How did you get here? By car, bus, foot, or?                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                                                                                  | 8. How long did you have to travel to get here?                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Are the customers able to obtain the same services and/or goods by non-ethnic businesses? | 10. If you aren’t able to come to this store, are there other stores that sell similar products or services that you can visit?                                                                                         |
Appendix B

1. Photographs of the store, layout and display shelves

Photo 1a. Exterior of store.  Photograph 1b. Exterior of Store

Photograph 2a. Layout of store
2. Photographs of services provided

Photograph 4a. Locksmith service

Photograph 4b. Community notices
3. Photographs of Brazilian products

Photograph 5a. Brazilian groceries

Photograph 5b. Brazilian groceries

Photograph 5c. Brazilian language Newspapers

Photograph 5d. Brazilian music
4. Photographs of non-Brazilian products

Photograph 6a. Goods of Thai origin

Photograph 6b. Goods of Thai origin

Photograph 6c. Goods of Chinese origin