Community building strategies of independent cooperative food retailers

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1.1 Introduction

The UK retail marketplace has faced continual change and disruption (Fernie, Fernie, & Moore, 2015). However, academic literature discussing these developments in the context of food retailing has tended to focus on the larger retail multiples (e.g., Burt & Sparks, 2003; Clarke, 2000; Wrigley, 1994), ignoring the fact that many small independent retailers outperform larger companies in terms of sales growth (Goodfellow, 2014). Where attention has fallen on independent food retailers, it has often been in a rural context (e.g., Byrom, Medway, & Warnaby, 2001; Byrom, Medway, & Warnaby, 2003), typically highlighting their social role(s). This has left a significant gap in academic inquiry relating to the community-based retail aspects of *urban* food retailing, which we explore from the perspective of independent cooperative retailers. Thus, a unique insight into the urban independent cooperative food retailer and their complex links between community, place, and social relations are advanced here. This chapter first considers the empirical literature surrounding independent food retailers and their respective communities, before illustrating our key findings and conclusions.

1.2 The independent retailer: Problems and prospects

The major focus of the limited literature on the small independent retailer, to date, relates to the perceived disadvantages of this retail form *vis-à-vis* its multiple retailer counterparts (see Clarke & Banga, 2011). Smith and Sparks (2000) summarize the problems and difficulties faced by small retailers in terms of:

- *Inadequacies in the trading environment*—i.e., competition from multiple retailers, economic and social change to the detriment of the small retailer, and locational difficulties in terms of spatial marginalization.

Case Studies in Food Retailing and Distribution. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-102037-1.00001-3

- *Inadequacies in the retail form*—i.e., a less efficient and effective operating cost base than larger formats, lack of availability of investment capital, supply problems (e.g., lack of economies of scale etc.); all of which compound the above changes in the trading environment.
- *Inadequacies in management*—i.e., limited expertise in, and knowledge of, management techniques.

Consequently, a major focus of existing research has been on reasons for their decline (see Coca-Stefaniak, Hallsworth, Parker, Bainbridge, & Yuste, 2005), and how it might be arrested, either through policy intervention (see Clarke & Banga, 2011; Kirby, 1981) or strategic action on the part of retailers themselves (see Megicks, 2001; Megicks & Warnaby, 2008). However, much of this research has a rural (and isolated), rather than urban, context; for example, in terms of investigating how the drawbacks of operating in peripheral areas and regions can be overcome (see Byrom et al., 2001, 2003; Jussila, Lotvonen, & Tykkyläinen, 1992). Later work on their community role (see Calderwood & Davies, 2012, 2013) reflects the fact that small retailers are more likely to be located in more rural areas.

In light of such difficulties, the continuance of small independent retailers may depend on their ability to perform various roles. Smith and Sparks (2000) posit that these include:

- *Consumer supply of products and services*—which may occur in a variety of contexts, ranging from isolated areas, where small independents may be the only shops available, and thus used for all purchases; to circumstances where the small shop is a "destination" shop, arising from a particular product/service specialism.
- *Diversity, "color," and choice*—arising from such specialism, and the fact that small retailers might offer an alternative, nonstandard format and customer offer in contrast to the homogeneity of a retail landscape dominated by multiple retailers.
- *Dynamism and local adaption*—arising from the fact that small independents are often a source of retail innovation. Smith and Sparks note that the ease of entry/exit in this sector can create volatility and dynamism; the latter aspect manifest in better understanding of local markets and appreciation of customer requirements.
- *Economic linkages with other businesses*—via the supply chains that provide the products sold by small retailers. Smith and Sparks stress that such linkages also arise from the fact that small retailers also consume a range of other products/services (including public services such as refuse collection etc.), which are more likely to be locally oriented.
- *Employment generation and maintenance*—especially self-employment, as the small shop may be a seed-bed for entrepreneurship.

A key factor is the extent to which small independent retailers can develop distinctive competence, which might enable them to achieve some degree of competitive advantage (or merely survive). Small independent retailer strategies have been investigated in detail by Megicks (2001), who identifies five generic competitive strategy types:

- *Buying group merchants*—i.e., members of larger buying groups who act as traditional merchants, assembling and merchandising stock lines and delivering them with a service level tailored to the needs of their identified customer base.

- *Full-service strategists*—i.e., demonstrating a strong customer focus and growing through diversifying activities into new products/markets, as well as service improvements. They are more proactive in marketing activities.
- *Specialist vendors*—i.e., conventional retailers of specialist goods, with a strong emphasis on merchandising and providing high levels of service and unique, quality products.
- *Indistinct traders*—i.e., "*distinguished by a lack of distinction*" (p. 323), lacking real initiative, and not particularly active in pursuing growth opportunities.
- *Free-standing merchants*—i.e., similar to buying group merchants in strategic orientation and modus operandi, but not part of buying groups, and therefore more autonomous.

This literature emphasizes the importance of market orientation (see Megicks & Warnaby, 2008), which resonates with some issues identified above, in that effectively responding to a more detailed understanding of the needs of a locally oriented customer base may be a source of competitive advantage. Byrom et al. (2003) imply that such local embeddedness and the consequent knowledge gained could be a source of both market-and product-led strategic expansion strategies. However, resonating with Megicks' grouping of "indistinct traders," Byrom et al., also identify a strategy of "strategic stasis," whereby the primary aim is to maintain the status quo in terms of customer base, turnover, and profit (perhaps reflecting the extent of the difficulties facing these retailers, as outlined above).

1.3 The independent retailer and their role in the local community

Given the importance of local knowledge and adaptation to the small independent retailer, and their widely acknowledged "social" role (Calderwood & Davies, 2012; Clarke & Banga, 2011; Smith & Sparks, 2000), could the community-run or small cooperative shop be an independent retail form more able to mitigate the negative impact of trends that have led to the decline of the small independent retailer more generally? Arguably, the retail cooperative movement provides a sustainable retail format for small food retailers, and one which can be pursued either as a retailers' buying group, retailers' cooperative, and/or a retailers' cooperative retail chain (Kennedy, 2016). However, much research around retail cooperation as a strategy for independent retailers ignores the importance of the community-led, "social" role advocated by Clarke and Banga (2011) and Smith and Sparks (2000). This is despite the fact that the retail sector cannot be fully understood without reflecting upon the "interrelated systems of which it is a part" (McArthur, Weaven, & Dant, 2016, p. 281). That is to say, the place providing a spatial context, and the community relations inherent within, is paramount to the retailer's success.

Smith and Sparks (2000, p. 208) note, "an independent small shop may also provide a sense of community or identity both for a place and for its inhabitants". Aside from the exceptions listed above (albeit their social focus revolves around a rural location), few retail studies acknowledge this observation and consequently,

community aspects have generally been treated as an "exogenous part of the environment" where in fact, the community should be recognized as being "completely endogenous to the enterprise" (Peredo and Chrisman, 2006, p. 310). Clarke and Banga (2011) explore this social role of the small retailer further, identifying four key aspects:

- *A "hub" for communities*—by providing an arena for social interaction, thereby helping to meet a variety of social, sustainability, and ethical needs (Megicks, 2007), through the facilitation of relationship-building, and creating emotional connections in a friendly environment.
- *Vital for the disadvantaged and socially excluded*—especially in terms of helping to meet the food shopping requirements of, for example, the elderly, financially deprived, socially excluded, and less mobile; groups which may be concentrated in geographically isolated communities (including in deprived urban areas).
- *Enhancing consumer choice and access*—to help consumers, such as those above who suffer poor economic and physical access to retail facilities (especially in relation to multiple retail provision), make more "informed" consumption choices, by increasing the "repertoire" of retail venues they frequent.
- *Creating consumer value*—potentially accomplished through three main ways: (1) the *generic features of small stores*, such as the ability to adapt to local situations in terms of providing a product range and level of service tailored to local needs; (2) the development of *specialist store formats* (e.g., offering better ease of access through location); and (3) by small retailers *targeting* their activities on specific consumer groups.

Also taking a more socially led view, Majee and Hoyt (2011) argue that the cooperative model in particular helps to build social capital between members and other stakeholders, which in turn strengthens both business and local community. In addition to calling for further research in this area, Moufahim, Wells, and Canniford (2017) urge marketing scholars to "dig deeper" when it comes to conceptualizing "community" as a unit of analysis. Therefore, to help advance our understanding of the role of independent cooperative food retailers and their respective community building activities, this chapter explores the complex links between retailing, community, place, and social relations.

Semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews were carried out with owners, store managers, and/or members from three food cooperatives located across the United Kingdom's Greater Manchester conurbation between late 2015 and 2016. Although a relatively small sample size, a contrasting case-type approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of these independent retailers and their community value to emerge (Mason, 2010). Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim and subsequent analysis involved coding and the development of initial themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Intercoder cross-checking was conducted in parallel by the authors to facilitate the identification, development and refinement of themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Independent cooperative retailers featured in this research include WC#1, a worker's cooperative that has been operational

since the 1970s; WC#2, another worker's cooperative, established in the mid-1990s; and a community cooperative (i.e., CC), which has been operational for three years.

1.4 Findings and discussion

The main themes identified from our data extend the concept of *community retailing* from a focus of just concentrating on the local *immediate community* to include also a *community of values* and a *supply chain community*, thereby suggesting a broader, more diffuse spatiality relating to the concept of community, beyond that of the immediate locale. Contrary to previous research (see Coca-Stefaniak et al., 2005), these independent retail cooperatives saw themselves as a viable alternative to the retail multiples. They enjoyed strong loyalty from customers who lived in the local area, as well as from those who shared a values-driven ethos, and displayed resilient financial growth despite the tough economic climate. Our thematic analysis now illustrates these additional dimensions of community-led retailing: *community of values, immediate community,* and the *supply chain community.*

1.4.1 Community of values

Contrary to Megicks's (2001) strategy of "indistinct traders" and Byrom et al.'s (2003) "strategic stasis," none of the independent food retail cooperatives could be accused of merely maintaining the status quo. Instead, there appeared to be a dynamic, values-led market orientation around providing safe, healthy, quality, and ethical food/nonfood products for their customers, acting sustainably, and creating opportunities for (and protecting) the workforce:

> *Our cooperative exists to encourage the optimum health of its customers and staff by providing quality vegetarian food and advice, whilst maintaining a caring, sustainable, democratic and ethical business environment for its workers (WC#1).*
>
> *Our aim is to trade honestly and ethically with our growers, suppliers and producers; promote local produce; offer a choice of organic foods free of artificial additives, preservatives and colours; and operate a 'No Junk Policy' (CC).*

Similarly, WC#2's statement of purpose echoes a strong focus on secure employment, equal opportunities, healthy consumption, fair trade, and a cooperative mindset:

> *The fundamental reasoning was to have a business that people wanted to shop in. It was basic ingredients. They were affordable. They were sourced with a little bit more care. Not too dissimilar to the Rochdale pioneers' basic history of the Co-op (WC#2).*

Importantly for all cooperatives, an *internal* community of shared values was ensured by having the right people to help develop and grow the business. For example:

> *They have got to build up the values of a cooperative and know what they are working towards; i.e. something where the food is sourced in a particular way, as well as a particular kind of food. So they have got to be on board with that element of it, as well as be willing or wanting to work cooperatively (CC).*

While independent food retail cooperatives had no problems in attracting new members with similar social and ethical values, many discussed the management struggles around balancing and securing the right skillsets:

> *I've got sixty-five member directors and then we've got five probationers. We have a quarterly members meeting. So strategy and policy are agreed upon. They can only be agreed by everybody. It's difficult, because we do require a consensus when decision making . . . There is less resentment if everyone is involved in that consensual process. We are trying to spend this year looking at ways that we can keep this kind of structure with that engagement and keep it dynamic and get the new members to feel as closely, as much ownership of people who have been there longer. There are challenges (WC#2).*

> *It's a community co-op where people from the community put their money into it and the board reflects that . . . The people at the shop are paid, but the board membership and participation other than that is all done on the fringes of everyone's time (CC).*

Although Smith and Sparks (2000) highlight "inadequacies in management" as a common problem amongst small retailers, the flexible management structure adopted by independent food retail cooperatives appeared to facilitate increased levels of internal trust and, more importantly, business innovation for the "social good":

> *There is a natural hierarchy that kind of comes and changes over time. It's worked very well in the sense it's helped us be quite an innovative and creative hard working co-op (WC#1).*
>
> *There is a built in mechanism for people to resign after three years. I think it's quite a positive thing as long as you've got a fundamental stability to be bringing new and innovative ideas to fresh people (CC).*

In addition, this sense of social innovation extended to cover spin-off, entrepreneurial ventures. WC#2, in particular, talked at length about a fund that it operated which aimed to "*try and encourage people to set up similar businesses . . . it's a great thing to be able to do . . . As individuals we are free to go and support any projects we choose to.*" In so doing, these independent food retail cooperatives managed to create a sustainable business model that successfully publicized their *community* values to local, national, and international members/stakeholders, as well as differentiating their values from larger food retail competitors.

1.4.2 Immediate community

Contrary to Peredo and Chrisman's (2006) notion that *community* is generally treated as an afterthought, distinct competences around the cooperative business model were evident in terms of a variety of values-led activities, benefiting communities, society, and the planet (see also Clarke & Banga, 2011; Megicks, 2007). This involved providing a strong sense of community for their customers and residents both within the local and global area, as well as attempts to protect the environment:

> *We have the 1%, 4% fund, which are attached to our wages and so they accurately reflect growth and prosperity . . . We made a donation to a local community centre that was installing energy at St John's [a local school] and that's revenue going back to local people . . . the 4% kind of accepts that we are part of quite an equal global trading system and much of the harm is in the Global South . . . securing their future with their community (WC#2).*

> *We pay a reasonable amount of money for all our recycling with a social enterprise and all our cardboard, tins, veg waste and all sorts are taken away. One of our members did a massive, brilliant campaign on plastic bags. He did a big installation on all the railings, you know, all along by the path was covered in plastic bags and got lots of children involved and really raised awareness of the problem in the seas and everything. We haven't had plastic bags in here for about eight years now. All the plastic that the animals were choking on it, sort of thing. Plastic doesn't disappear. It's horrible stuff (WC#1).*

> *The general line is that we keep waste to a minimum and I know that we often cook it. Say, for example, we've made soups or smoothies by reusing vegetables that would otherwise have been wasted. But I think, we always seem to be on a constant quest for improvement in terms of waste (CC).*

Difficulties relating to "inadequacies in the trading environment," and/or "inadequacies in the retail form" (see Smith & Sparks, 2000), appeared to be an issue for recently established cooperatives only. For example, CC spoke of limitations surrounding their economies of scale in comparison to other more established cocoperatives:

> *There is a catch 22 isn't there? Because [WC#2] is large now - it can price well. Whereas, because we are not, it's hard, it's difficult. Because of our resources, it's difficult to be price competitive. Obviously, the more you sell the cheaper it could get (CC).*

In contrast, the more established cooperatives (i.e., WC#1, WC#2) experienced much less marginalization in these areas, preferring instead to adopt a differentiation focus (i.e., akin to a "specialist vendor"—see Megicks, 2001) in an attempt to remove themselves from direct price competition against other food retailers:

We sell a lot of things other people don't sell, and that's why we've survived. We are very proactive in doing different things . . . There is a big call for the nutritional area, you know and I'm really, really busy up there, it's like a GP surgery up there some mornings . . . I do blood testing and blood pressure days and all that sort of thing (WC#1).

We always saw our competition as multiples and position ourselves - so our organic food, fresh produce is often competitive with non-organic and supermarkets. For normal shopping, we very much wanted to be complementary within our local shopping area and we are part of this wonderful trading centre of independents and there is a symbiotic relationship there. We try and encourage people to set up similar businesses. . . We were helped by other co-ops etc. and we are happy to help and support (WC#2).

Clear evidence of the independent cooperatives' specialist supply of products and services impacted on the range of customer profiles who shopped there. WC#1 and CC spoke of the advantages of being located near a transient university/school population and WC#2 discussed their appeal to ethnic communities:

Our demographic is very well educated with people who work at the university as well as students. Actually that's not our main customer, it is a big part, but it's not what we survive on, really. We know a lot of our customers and we've a lot of regulars and we have a kind of community feel, even though it can be transient - a lot of people work in the area over the years. I think as we offer all the niche products it brings people in (WC#1);

We are surrounded by Asian communities, lots of communities that have got a great heritage of cooking and we've got a big Ethiopian customer base and it's the kind of people who like to cook and like ingredients . . . it's great. There is a real wide range of ages and people and essentially more younger people as well (CC).

As opposed to the rural community retailer (see Byrom et al., 2001, 2003; Calderwood & Davis, 2012, 2013; Jussila et al., 1992), none of the cooperatives spoke of any locational difficulties as business was not always directed toward local customers. Here, WC#2 estimated "*the percentage [of customers] that are within two to five miles is really high*." Subsequently, there was much discussion around how urban independent food retail cooperatives had to work hard to change outdated perceptions of their business model:

In the olden days it was vegetarian and it was one of the first no smoking vegetarian businesses - 46 years ago that was very radical . . . Vegetarian isn't a big thing now. You can get vegetarian food anywhere (WC#1);

The perception of wholefood shops were they were exclusive - they were pious . . . There is only so much you can control. It's like, let's try to make it welcoming and fun and that people come in and it's just a shop, a community shop and not to feel that it's not a shop for them (WC#2).

Consequently, in a bid to change such perceptions, a lot of effort went into communications/PR activities. With most independent food retail cooperatives being involved in activities with local school children, some also implemented social media strategies and participated in local festivals:

> *We've done a bit of work in schools and had children come in and see what was going on and that kind of outreach and providing things like apprenticeships and that way of giving back to the community (CC).*

> *Primary schools come into us and we'll do little tours and talk about, depending on what they are studying, whether it's nutrition or fairtrade or growing [your own food]. We cook with the local community allotment and do talks about growing . . . we feel it's part of our responsibility as a co-op just to spread the word and show what we are doing (WC#2).*

> *Our social media is good. I think we've got about 5,000 Twitter followers, and 6,000 on Facebook. The café do a lot of events . . . They do some festivals, but you know, it's more fairs and stuff they do (WC#1).*

1.4.3 Supply chain community

Positive supply chain relations were paramount to creating a sustainable business which delivered on ethical, social, and environmental values. Linking together with a *community of values* and the *immediate community*, supply chain activities often extended to global suppliers as well as local ones:

> *We've built up relationships over the years with UK growers . . . who have got an incredibly vulnerable business. One of the best things that [WC#2] does for growers is trade as we do, plan, clear them [i.e. stock] quickly and not try and depress the prices. While accepting that we do trade within what is our eco-global trading system and we are part of that . . . We can't say that every supply line is perfect; but we kind of are constantly trying (WC#2).*

Another notable difference from independent small rural retailers which permits urban independent food retail cooperatives to maximize scales of economies is the reciprocal relationships with other larger cooperatives:

> *A lot of what we sell is very high-end in the shop. But we also have a special relationship with other co-ops, so our wall of beans beats any Tescos hands down, because it's all organic. Our buying power isn't as big as theirs, but our organic eggs are much cheaper than the Co-op[1]. We have some mutual benefits all together and that's why some of them are knocking spots off supermarkets. As we work together to support each other (WC#1).*

[1] The 'Co-op' referred to in this context is the Co-operative Retail Group.

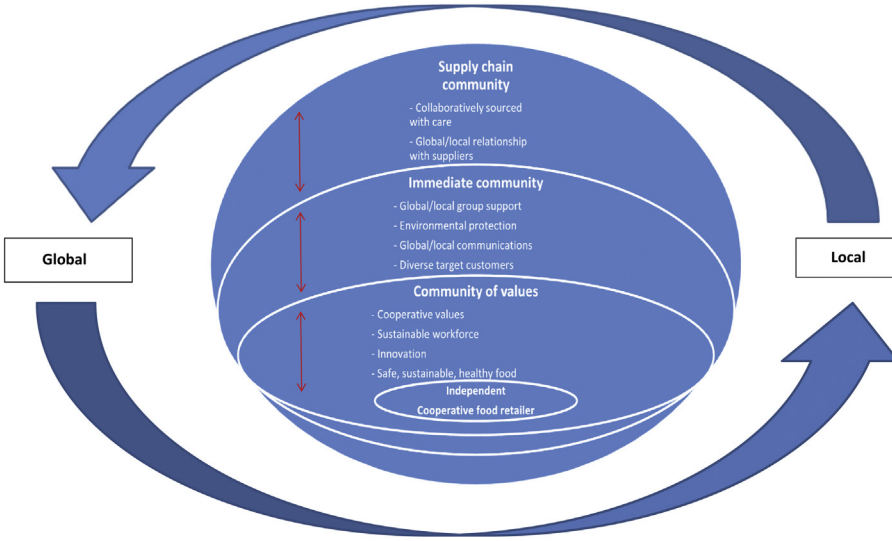

Figure 1.1 Community and the independent cooperative food retailer.

1.5 Conclusions

Through a contrasting case-type approach, our study sheds light upon the urban independent cooperative food retailer and its complex links between community, place, and social relations. This involves extending the concept of *community retailing* from just a focus on the local *immediate community*, to include also a *community of values* and a *supply chain community*. It recognizes a much more fluid and dynamic conceptualization of *community*, with a broader, more diffuse spatiality and ethicality beyond that of the immediate locale (see Fig. 1.1).

Therefore, in addition to looking at *community* in terms of spatial proximity, these independent retail cooperatives were strategically positioned to capture loyalty from their *immediate community* as well as another layer of ethically value-driven consumers and suppliers (i.e., community of values; supply chain community) which reside outside the "local." That is to say, these cooperative retailers actively sought and engaged local customers and residents around seasonal events (e.g., pumpkin growing workshops), cookery workshops (e.g., reducing food waste), and school competitions (e.g., designing a hessian shopping bag), to name but a few. Moreover, another layer of *community* engagement activities for these co-ops revolved around organizing workshops and events for national/global suppliers and customers looking to trade with and purchase ethical product alternatives, respectively. In so doing, each of the independent cooperative food retailers used a number of online and more traditional communication practices and tactics to mobilize local/global support, expand networks, and in some cases bring about socially responsible actions.

Overall, this case study offers significant learning points for both academicians and practitioners. From an academic perspective, we extend the concept of *community* retailing beyond that of spatial boundaries and instead advocate that community is embedded within all strategic operations concerning customers, suppliers, and other local/global stakeholders, and not just as an afterthought to cater for customers within the geographic locale of the store. Such an approach may prove advantageous for retail practitioners, whereby instead of trying to compete directly on aspects such as product pricing and/or opening hours, a more cooperatively led engagement with customers and other stakeholders in the food supply chain can lead to the creation of greater social value across local, national, and global communities. Thus, helping to bring about a greater "common good" for consumers and suppliers, as well as a collective, *community* drive for social change.

Acknowledgment

This study was funded by The Academy of Marketing Research Initiative Fund (2015−16).

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