



Locally-Owned Retail Stores and the Revitalized Downtown:
An Investigation of the Role of Civic Engagement and Local Capitalism

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Prior to World War II, downtown areas throughout the United States were vital areas for commerce and consumption. Post-war suburbanization and the advent of the shopping mall changed all of this, as retailers vacated their downtown locations in favor of storefronts in decentralized locations that followed the growing population sprawl (Padilla & Eastlick, 2009). Consequently, downtowns were left with mostly unoccupied buildings, offering little reason for people to visit and ultimately deteriorating over time (Cohen, 2007). However, the last decade has witnessed a renaissance of many downtowns across the country, as locally-owned retailers have sought out downtown areas to set up shop and consumers are following suit by supporting these efforts (Faulk, 2006). Such movement signals a level of commitment to buying and selling locally that could be seen as a form of local capitalism on the part of store owners as well as their customers when understood through the lens of civic engagement.

Civic engagement refers to the ways that citizens actively participate in the life of their communities, helping to shape them while improving the conditions for those in them through supporting commercial and residential efforts to rebuild (Tolbert, Lyson, & Irwin, 1998). Indeed, civic engagement is often viewed as a necessary component for downtown revitalization, and something which may occur more readily when linked with opportunities for consumption via local capitalism, as these opportunities provide a reason for people to return to downtown areas (Cohen, 2007). Despite the growing trend in downtown revitalization and the economic potential it offers (Faulk, 2006), there are few studies that examine the topic, and none that link the locally-owned retail store to it through the concepts of civic engagement and local capitalism. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore how locally-owned retail stores offer a mechanism for revitalization that is fueled by civic engagement on the part of customers and store owners.

An ethnographic research design was employed to address the purpose of the study. The downtown of one large city in the southeastern US comprised the field location. This area was deemed appropriate because it has experienced intense revitalization in the past decade and hosts a variety of retail and service offerings. Specific methods used to collect data included site observation as well as in-depth and field interviews with store owners and customers. For each site, the physical surroundings, people within them, and the activities taking place were observed. A total of six in-depth interviews and eight field interviews were conducted. Questions asked of store owners included their motivations for opening the store, the benefits and challenges that stem from the location, and what they gain by being located in a revitalized area. Questions asked of customers included why they sought out locally-owned stores and whether their decision to shop downtown has an impact on the area. Fieldnotes and interviews were transcribed and then Spiggle's (1994) suggestions for qualitative data analysis and interpretation

were followed, wherein patterns in the data were documented and categorized and then conceptual links between patterns were identified. As a result of this process, two primary themes emerged to structure the interpretation: *Advocating for Local* and *We're in this Together*.

Advocating for Local reflects the extent to which participants talked about being dedicated to operating or patronizing locally-owned stores in the downtown area out of concern for the well-being of the local residents. For example, CB described one store as “the place I go when I’m buying gifts ...I love their message...they support local artists.” A similarly strong connection to the downtown community was indicated by AY, “The prices are higher than what you would pay at chains but you’re supporting local people so that makes it worthwhile.” Supporting “neighbors,” as BF termed them, means being downtown among others who share the same commitment to the community. These burgeoning opportunities to engage in local capitalism have a positive impact on the area, making it a shopping destination, as FT explained, “I remember just ten years ago, I would never go downtown to shop. Now it is where I go.”

We're in this Together reflects the level of commitment to supporting locally-owned stores not just on the part of customers shopping downtown, but among the store owners as a group. For example, JT said, “A bunch of us got together and made a map of all of the independent stores and services downtown...we each keep a stack in our store,” adding that “we all cross-market on social media too,” thereby highlighting the community spirit driving a shared commitment to the greater good of the downtown area. Likewise, HS sees it as her duty as a store owner to give back to the community that she supports and that supports her. She stated, “The big picture is to create a unique city and that happens by putting our resources back into the community.” Through a network of local store owners, the local capitalism necessary to draw people to downtown is established, while a foundation of strong civic engagement ensures that this network will thrive.

Findings highlight the extent to which, through local capitalism, civic engagement is vital to successful downtown revitalization efforts. It is clear that locally-owned stores play a key role in making a downtown the center of commerce once again, but not simply by providing opportunities to shop. Rather, it occurs through the commitment to community shared among store owners as well as their patrons. Further research could employ the findings here to develop a model for revitalization efforts that can be applied within similar locales throughout the US.

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