

CEEP: Jamaica, Queens

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Introduction

My name is Saied Khan. I am a 23-year-old student at BMCC. I was born in raised in Jamaica, Queens. For my research question I decided to ask local bodega owners “Does the demography of a neighbourhood have an influence on growth and sustainability as a small business, and if so how do you adapt?” I decided to focus on bodega owners because I feel like they are a staple in New York City neighbourhoods. Bodegas are “small convenience stores that sells staples like chips, candy, coffee, sodas, lottery tickets, and over-the-counter remedies, along with household items like laundry detergent and trash bags.” (E.Riley, 2021) I noticed ever since I was growing up that there were bodegas on literally every single street corner in New York City. Having my local one down my block and always going there not realizing the type of impact he had on my community.

Every bodega I would go to in each borough I would notice a trend or a change or style. Bodega’s usually carry very similar products from household products to eatery. Though some bodegas accept food stamps, some accept ebt, some have specialty dishes, some have sections dedicated to products from specific countries. This is when I thought about demography of the neighbourhood, I am in. My neighbourhood has a diverse mix of ethnicities, and a mix of economic classes. I noticed that my bodega that I go to accepts ebt but does not accept food stamps as payment. Whereas bodegas a few blocks up towards the forest hills area, does not accept none of these payments and is a cash/card only business.

My community has many diverse ethnicities. There are five houses comprised on my block and I am of Guyanese descent, my next door neighbour is of Spanish decent and my other neighbour is of Greek descent. Alongside the economic scale in my neighbourhood varies as well. Some are home owners, some rent the floor they live in, some have cars, and some even

take the MTA as their main form of transportation. Bodegas are used by all types of people regardless of financial stability or ethnicity. I noticed in my bodega there are large isles dedicated to Spanish produced products, Caribbean produced products, and even Christian tailored products. These items are usually household cleaners or hometown snacks that someone who immigrated this country might appreciate. I explored these products and even use some Spanish produced products myself due to how vastly available my bodega made them to the community. The mix of cultures allows for many opportunities to discover the many products each culture produces.



(A picture of my local deli with a diverse section of ethnic products varying from culture to culture.)

The research I have discovered and uncovered was a pattern I have always noticed. I always wondered why certain bodegas in certain neighbourhoods contained certain themes, certain items, or operated in a way to accommodate the community it resides in. The questions I asked during interviews and even to myself invoked many more patterns that were shown. I know I am more aware when going into bodega's in certain neighbourhoods and even going into my local grocery store, or local takeout store. I will recognize the community that makes them

thrive, it can be seen by how the stores operate, what they contain, and how they adapted to the demography in their neighbourhood.

Methods

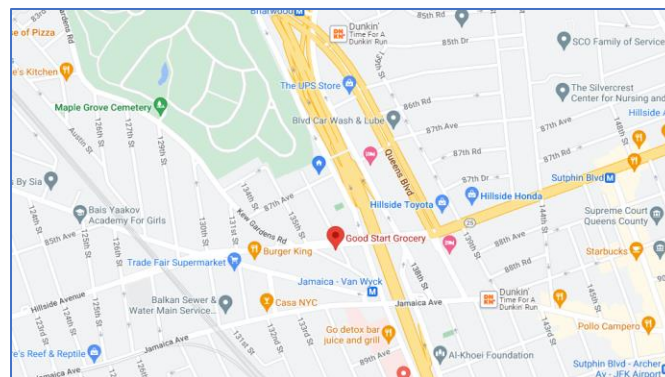
The methods I approach this project with was a semi-structured interview style. I wanted this experience with my research question to be as authentic as possible. I wanted to interview at least two to three people who were willing participants. Being from my neighbourhood especially this was a tough task. Most people are busy majority of the time, and no one cares about research projects that earns them no instant value. I could not email any bodega owners so I had to walk in a few local ones and ask if they could give me their contact information and I had to come to terms with knowing a phone interview was the best I was going to accomplish with someone who runs a twenty-four hour business. How I went about my semi-structured interview was that I had a few questions written down, the core questions about demography, business, and my research question. I then decided I was going to free-flow follow up questions by adapting to the person I was talking to.

I ultimately wanted to get the feedback of multiple bodega owners but only my local bodega owner was willing to participate and even then he was a tad bit reluctant. I was just an average customer, I was not a news crew, he was not getting paid, and in most bodega store owners eyes the interview seemed pointless. I appreciated that my local bodega owner gave me his phone number and told me to call him late at night because that was when he could talk. I respected that and did not push forth for a formal interview because I wanted to make sure he was comfortable. I also asked one of the employees for her contact information and she gladly provided me with it. She was a fulltime student and on her off hours would work at the bodega. I

kept the same interview style with her. Over the phone, questions ready, I had my pen and paper ready to go and it was easier for me to ask questions because we were not looking face to face. I enjoyed the phone call interview because I was able to ask questions I would forget about if I was talking to them in person.

Results/Interviews

I first interviewed one of the employees, this was a speaker phone call at 8:30pm at night. A time that I knew she and I would be done with our studies for the day. Her name was Haylee, and she is a 20-year-old college student raised in Jamaica, Queens. I wrote down questions and then I free-flowed my responses and how I was going to implement the questions into our conversation. I had a pen, and a paper then wrote down everything she and I both said. I may have missed some words, and some reactions. It was a difficult process trying to write my response as I go to ask her a new question and keep the conversation flowing. I took a few breaks in-between to gather my thoughts and jot my information down, my interviewee was very respectful and just wanted to make sure I wrote down everything that was said.



(Map Of Bodega Neighbourhood)

Interview #1 (Employee – Haylee)

Saied (Myself)

- Hello, Thank you for taking time out of your day and being with me here today. May I ask your name, age, and occupation?

Haylee (Employee)

- Glad to be here, My name is Haylee, I am 20 years old, I am a full-time student and I work at Good start deli part-time.

Saied

- Good to know, I am going to just jump right into the thesis of my research question. My main question is if the demography of our neighbourhood we reside in has an effect on the way "Good start deli" grows and thrives? how do you guys adapt to accomodate the locals?

Haylee

- This is a very percise question. Umm, I think that abe (the owner) knew that everyone around this block in particular including himself, were majority hispanic and christian. We have a church right up the street, we have many ethnic restaurants around and we just have familiar products the community will be used to. On top of that we speak the native language so that is an added bonus of comfort for our customers.

Saied

- I like your answer, do you think the locals alone can allow the bodega to thrive?

Haylee

- I personally think bodega's thrive because of the locals within the community. We do not have to be huge in sales but as long as we serve our community then we will always get business.

Saied

- That makes sense, I come to this bodega alot and I think I can speak on behalf on us in the community that we appreciate you guys! That being said, I notice that you guys take ebt, Does that have anything to do with the economic standings of some within the community?

Haylee

- Thank you, haha. I am just an employee and I just try to do my best. Umm the ebt was added because we just noticed we had returning customers come over and over. There only form of payment was ebt and we formerly declined it. After a process we got it in effect so we could serve those who could not pay cash.

Saied

- I am super glad you are so knowledgeable about the store. I am not even sure I have to ask the Abe any questions at this point! How long have you lived in this neighbourhood for and what is your ethnicity if you do not mind me asking?

Haylee

- I have been here for a while so I practically know the in's and outs. I lived on 124th street my whole life and both my parents are guatemalan.

Saied

- Ahh you do not live too far from me. I myself am guyanese so we are both from south america! My last question for you is, if in the coming years this neighborhood faces genetrification. How do you think this bodega would react and adapt?

Haylee

- Interesting! to be honest I do not think I would be working here until that happens. But if that were to happen then I personally think we would take the same approach. Just understanding the changes that will be happening and doing what we have always done, putting our customers first.

Saied

- Thank you so much, I appreciate you for answering and giving me your time.

What I learned from my interviewee is that as an employee she recognized my thesis from my research question. She recognized that demography plays a huge role in small businesses especially as staples such as our beloved bodegas. I knew that having a semi-structured interview style would be very beneficial for this specific type of research question. I understood that my thesis could have many theories and many opinions. Essentially the bodega employee “Haylee” agreed with various parts of my research question. I read an article about how to conduct better interview questions, I learned that I should “Ask Open-ended questions – I ask open ended questions that can’t be answered with a simple yes or no.” (J.Bunting) I took this and I realized just trying to ask filler yes or no questions would not get me the answers I need for this research question. I then crafted very particular questions that were somewhat challenging and somewhat easy to answer for “Haylee” the employee.

Interview #2 (Store Owner – Abe)

Saied

- Hello Abe, It is a pleasure to finally have this phone call. I am just going to jump in right away. Firstly I want to ask what your age, ethnicity, and occupation.

Abe

- Hello Saied, straight to the questions already I see. I am somewhere around 55-60, I'm shy about my age. I am of dominican descent and I have been a business store owner for the past 15 years.

Saied

- Wow that is a long time to be doing what you do. I would like to ask you my research question now. Does the demography of our neighbourhood have an influence on your bodega's performance and its sustainability?

Abe

- Of course it does. I have seen this neighbourhood change more in the past 10 years than I ever seen before. This neighbourhood has been less diverse then it slowly started to grow in diversity as more & more people started finding affordable housing around here. I took this as an opportunity to customize my store to the likings of my returning customers in the neighborhood.

Saied

- That is really interesting, I am glad that you also think about demography in that light. How do you deal with the rapid change in community? Does it have any affect on prices or products?

Abe

- Well, as any business owner you have to adapt. If I never adapted I would not be here all these years later. Prices are controlled by the economy usually and products are sometimes placed for my heritage. I put sections of products I am used to and enjoy selling to my customers who use them aswell! Aside from that we have everything any bodega has to offer.

Saied

- I see that. You are very wise sir. How do you deal with competition? I know with all the change in the neighbourhood there has to be rising competitors.

Abe

- Thank you, you're a wise kid. Competition will always exist. There is a bodega on every corner. Each is tailored for every block and has its own set of community that allows it to stay afloat. That is how my store stays open. The good people of our neighbourhood is all I need to stay relevant, they keep this alive.

Saied

- Interesting take, I never looked at it that way before. Where do you see the bodega in the next 5 to 10 years from now?

Abe

- I am about ready to retire. So whoever is next in line to step up and serve the future generation of people in this community then they can come. I am opening the opportunity up so this store can stay here for decades to come.

Saied

- That was a great answer sir. I've been coming here since I was young and I really saw the changes in the neighbourhood but this store stood true to its roots. What would you say to future business owners trying to start in this neighbourhood?

Abe

- Ha, I never really talk this much about my business you know. One thing I would say to anyone trying to start anything around here is to do your research. Get your education and that does not mean only being book smart. Understand your community, area, and your goal. Lay the blueprint out and everything else will follow in line. That goes for you as well young man.

Saied

- Thank you for the kind words! Thank you for your time and this was a very interesting interview.

After interviewing the store owner “Abe” my eyes were opened even more. He was indirectly agreeing with my thesis. I noticed I even learned even more things than I thought I already knew about business, location, and demography. It is surely obvious that when it comes to certain stores, the demography will have an affect on the way the store performs, the products it contains, and the changes it may make. The makeup of people within the community will most certainly be seen in stores all throughout diverse neighbourhoods. Abe is a really intelligent store owner and there is a reason he has been in my neighbourhood for over 15 years. He not only answered each question, but he also added his own twist and gave me personal insight as well. I felt very connected with Abe and was glad he agreed to be interviewed.

Discussion

After assessing both an employee and the store owner I was conclusive on my thesis. Just walking around my neighbourhood in general I can see how the varying cultures paint the picture of what storefronts, art, and atmosphere we have created as a community. A community truly makes local businesses thrive, and local businesses do not need to be multi-million dollar grossing yearly. A local business is the type of business that can adapt and thrive based on what Abe said. A local business can react to occurrences such as gentrification and stay afloat based on what Haylee said.

My research question and my intense follow-up questions were answered precisely by both Haylee the employee and Abe the owner. Both of them despite being in two different command of powers both had very similar takes on the same questions I asked. Adapting is a common theme that I notice demography will have on businesses. Whether that be a change of community or change of economic standings within the neighbourhood. A local store must always be willing to adapt, If they do not adapt due to rapid changes then they will not thrive. I

also realized that small businesses are meant to be simple. Just having reoccurring loyal customers is enough to keep you afloat and stay in the game. I always had this input that you had to maximize profits to stay relevant. That is not the case when it comes to community-based stores and businesses.

I now want to do further research to understand the specific demography that sets neighbourhoods apart. This may be a tougher question to crack but I want to understand why certain neighbourhoods have more bodegas, while other neighbourhoods have more franchises. Demography has such a huge impact on the neighbourhoods around us, the way they operate, sell, and produce products. I think my research was tastefully answered and I am content with having these two educated insights by two gracious participants. I agree with majority of the points both Haylee and Abe were saying so my thesis was proven in a sort of sense.

The research collecting was both a great and tough situation. Having to be a full-time whilst trying to reach out to being in my neighbourhood was a rough patch. Many people are dismissive, especially in Jamaica, Queens we are extremely quick and do not trust easy. Most bodega owners could not be bothered because “I would be wasting their time.” I had to accept the fact that familiarity was going to set me apart from the crowd. After being rejected by two bodega’s I just went to my local one. I loved the semi-structured interview style, dealing with social anxiety myself it allowed me to really express myself and not be scared for once. I am also glad about my approach of the phone call, having a phone in between us made it less awkward than it was going to be in person.

I think the effect my research had on both the employee Haylee and the store owner Abe was that it allowed them to think more. Usually when we do our same routine everyday we are not as mindful to the things around us than we usually are. I think when I offered such an in-

depth question that pertains to both their livelihoods they instantly started to think outside the box. I felt as if I could have expanded more but the time crunch caught up and I got two excellent prospects. I feel accomplished with my research, and I think anyone who reads the interviews, or my word document will learn something. I think Haylee will understand the way her bodega works and will adjust it in her work ethic. I think that Abe will be more wary about his customers the next time they come in, he may pay attention to who is who more consciously now. My research question has been partially answered “Does demography of a neighbourhood have an influence on small businesses growth and sustainability?” My answer now is that they do shape and define what a small business is.

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