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How an Ethnic Store Impacts a Community - The Case of Kam Sen Foods in White Plains

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How an Ethnic Store Impacts a Community
- The Case of Kam Sen Foods in White Plains

BY

Tiantian Tang

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

In the US, demographics are rapidly changing. The U.S. population is more ethnically diverse than ever before. According to USDA (United States Department of Agriculture), the U.S. population is expected to add between 50 and 80 million people by 2020. There will be greater proportions of Latinos, Blacks and Asians. During the next 20 years, the U.S. Latino population is expected to grow by 1.2 million annually. Population increases for non-Latino Whites are estimated at 500,000 annually. Yearly population growth for Blacks and Asians is estimated at 400,000 each.

Focusing on the Asian-American population alone, an estimated 15.2 million residents say they are Asian or Asian in combination with one or more other race, according to July 1, 2008, estimates by the U.S. Census Bureau (United States Census Bureau, 2008). This group accounts for five percent of the total U.S. population. The buying power of Asian Americans was \$509 billion in 2009, according to the Selig Center, and is expected to rise to \$697 billion in 2014.

This fast growing ethnic population is affecting the food market in the U.S. greatly. The Economic Research Service has identified three general demographic trends expected to shape future U.S. food markets: more diversity, more mature consumers and U.S. population growth. This means that there will be more grocery stores

specializing in the foods of a certain nationality or culture. These stores are known as ethnic markets and may also serve as gathering places for immigrants.

This research will focus on Kam Sen Food, an Asian supermarket located in downtown White Plains. According to the census of 2008 (United States Census Bureau, 2008), there were 53,077 people, 20,921 households, and 12,704 families residing in the city of White Plains. The racial makeup of the city was 64.93% White, 15.91% African American, 4.5% Asian, 0.34% Native American, 0.07% Pacific Islander, 10.37% from other races, and 3.88% from two or more races. Since these statistics are similar to the average national data, White Plains will serve as a model community to find out how ethnic store affects such an American community.

Kam Sen Foods is the place I visit almost three times a week since I moved here. It's the biggest Asian Grocery supermarket in Westchester County. Located in the heart of White Plains, it carries mainly Chinese foods along with other Asian foods and Hispanic foods. Other than foods, it also provides daily living supplies like toilet paper, kitchenware, and so on. I'm an international student from China. When I first came to the U.S., I lived in New Rochelle. I found my life very inconvenient because there were no Asian stores there. I had no way to buy food or other Chinese products in New Rochelle. After a month, I moved to White Plains. I felt my life changed soon because of the existence of this Asian supermarket. I can find almost everything I need.

The focus of this study is how the store is viewed by residents in the community. What about other ethnic groups? Are they happy about the existence of this store? This research will try to find out what it brings to the community and what it takes. There are some obvious benefits, such as the economic advantages. Such a big mall can provide a lot of jobs, especially for ethnic people. But there is no such thing of all good. It must have some negative effects. For example, how does it affect small Asian stores in White Plains?

Basically, the research will have two main sections – the good and the bad, analyze the economic, culture, environment and other effects it brings to the community. I will collect data from the residents who live around the store and from the customers. Interviews will be a major way of finding facts in this research. My designed interview object for now includes the manager of the store, some of the employees, customers of different ages, ethnicity, gender, and also small business owners in the neighborhood.

The purpose of this research is to develop some useful information for decision makers of the city and future investors of ethnic stores. For the decision makers, what is the real cost of building such a large ethnic store, what are the cultural, economic and environmental benefits and costs, what they can do ahead of time to lower the bad effects in the future? For the investors, there will be information on how to define the potential customer, how to attract people from other ethnicities and so on.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

During my research on the subject of the effects of local ethnic grocery stores, I found there are surprisingly less results than I thought. Most research of the ethnic market is about business development and ethnic identity. Almost no article is specifically focused on American ethnic stores in the community base. I choose three articles which have some aspects that related to my subject.

There is an article called “the call of the mall” from “Economist, 1/24/2009”. The article reports that although most cities in the U.S. are very ethnically diverse, ethnic grocery stores and malls have become more popular. Schools and neighborhoods that previously were dominated by single ethnic groups have diversified, but each culture still retains some of its individual characteristics of clothing and cooking.

“More surprising than the rise of ethnic shopping centers outside traditional neighborhoods is what has happened to those neighborhoods. Most are no longer the population centers of their communities, and many now play host to other groups. Los Angeles's Korea town is largely, and increasingly, Hispanic. Yet businesses catering to Koreans are thriving, and the district has even expanded. Suburban visitors explain how one of the poorest neighborhoods in Los Angeles can sustain expensive shoe shops and diamond jewelers.”(Economist, 2009) This is a similar situation as in White Plains. It indicates that not just that special ethnic population goes to an ethnic store; people from other cultures also like to go to an ethnic store to purchase foods and

other products. So what is the main reason for them to go to an ethnic store?

“Ethnic communities that are based on shopping are, of course, not nearly as monolithic as ones rooted in language and neighborhoods. Latinos also go to Gap, as well as to Asian supermarkets like 99 Ranch. A similar trend can be seen in Irvine's new shopping centre. The shelves in H-Mart contain Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese foods, as well as American breakfast cereal. The menu in Mr Lam's restaurant includes Vietnamese and Cambodian dishes as well as Chinese ones. The people who frequent centers like this one are not so much clinging to their parents' and grandparents' ways as creating a new culture that is both pan-Asian and American.”(Economist, 2009) It says that the reason of this phenomenon is because the new way of thinking from the younger generation, they “are not so much clinging to their parents' and grandparents' ways.” (Economist, 2009) This is a question that I will try to find out in my research – what is the reason for people from other ethnicity go to this Chinese grocery store and how it effects their life anyway?

The second article is called “Family Firms, Networks and ‘Ethnic Enterprise’: Chinese Food Industry in Britain” written by Edmund Terence Gomez & Gordon C. K. Cheung. This study focuses on the Chinese family enterprises in the United Kingdom, especially the food industry. This study explores the assertion that, among companies owned by ethnic minorities, culture strongly influences the form of business development. This argument is assessed through a focus on Chinese food-based enterprises in the UK. Two family-controlled companies, Seven Seas (Frozen Food)

Ltd and Dayat Foods Packaging Ltd, were selected as case studies as they are involved in key business components of the Chinese food chain industry. Through an in-depth comparative study of the history and development of these two firms, they consider the argument that Chinese businesses have evolved well because of family ties and their inclusion in mutually-beneficial ethnically-constructed networks. Through these case studies, they provide an alternative perspective to diasporic Chinese business development which brings into question the extensive use of the concept of ethnic enterprise.

The first section of this article provides a social and economic history of Chinese enterprise in the UK, as well as the factors that contributed to the incorporation of a large number of family firms. It then focuses on the nature of companies in the Chinese food distribution sector before undertaking an in-depth case study of two family firms, profiling their rise and their business activities. The study concludes with an assessment as to whether the use of the concepts of networks and family firms in the literature on Chinese enterprise has served to essentialize Chinese enterprise and homogenize this ethnic community.

“Food distribution firms, among the largest Chinese-owned enterprises in Britain, constitute fundamental pillars of the food chain that support the whole Chinese catering industry. And their form of enterprise can provide insights into the important role of cultural and intra-ethnic business networks among members of this ethnic community in the Chinese food sector. Most of these firms function as family firms, which allows for an analysis of the extent to which their “Chineseness” influences

their pattern of enterprise development.” (Gomez, 2009) So it also brings out the viewpoint of culture influence.

This study has dealt with three primary concepts used in the literature on businesses run by ethnic minorities, specifically the Chinese, i.e., culture, networks and family firms. An analysis of the paths of enterprise development by firms involved in the Chinese food chain, from production to distribution to catering, an important example of an ethnic economy, helped provide insights into the importance of these concepts in the literature on “ethnic economy”.

“Chinese-owned enterprises have no special ethnic style, contrary to much current scholarship on the supposedly unique character of overseas Chinese business, which also brings into question the application of the concept of ethnic enterprise. The overwhelming attention on the ostensible business networks among Chinese-owned enterprises and on the impact of cultural traits on their form of enterprise development, including the use of family firms to run a business, has diverted attention from important concepts useful for explaining form of capital development by members of a minority community. This study indicates that the concepts more useful for understanding Chinese enterprise are entrepreneurship, class resources, and firm development and organization.” (Gomez, 2009) It is clear that the characteristic of Chinese-owned enterprises makes it different than other ethnic enterprises. In my research, I will find out if Kam Sen has the same characteristics that are described in this article and how it influences the way they run their business. Then what are the effects to the community at the end of the day?

The third article is called “Group Processes in Food Choices: The Role of Ethnic Identity and Perceived Ethnic Norms upon Intentions to Purchase Ethnical Food Products”. This paper investigates the role of two social psychological variables in the domain of food purchasing conduct, namely the perception of the norms of one’s own group and the level of identification with one’s own group, within the framework of the Theory of Planned Behavior. The TPB assumes deliberate processes and the evaluations of the possible alternatives to be at the basis of individual choices, and has been successfully applied to several domains of human behavior, including consumers’ conduct and food choice. According to the TPB, the most proximal determinants of deliberate behavior are behavioral intentions; these, in turn, are influenced by three other determinants: attitude towards the behavior; subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control. What interested me is the theory of TPB and how it affects ethnical identification and perceived ethnic group norms, in the ethnic food purchasing domain. “Results confirm that the TPB makes a good job in predicting intentions to purchase ethnical food.”(Nenci, 2008) “These results confirm the role of normative influence upon human deliberate conducts emerged in Terry et al. This influence might be moderated by group-based and identity-related variables, such as identification with the ethnic community. People might be more responsive to the norms of their ethnic group when they feel more strongly attached to that particular group.” (Nenci, 2008) So is this the true reason that Chinese people go to this Chinese store? Then why do Hispanic people like to shop here too?

Chapter 3

Methodology

The focus of this study will be how the store is viewed by residents in the community.

The purpose of this research is to develop some useful information for the city and future investors of ethnic stores.

There are three main questions:

1. What are the residents in the community feel about this store?
2. How does it affect the other businesses in White Plains?
3. What are the other effects it brings to the community?

Interviews will be a major way to find the answers to these questions. My designed interview object for now includes the manager of the store, some of the employees, customers of different ages, ethnicity, gender, and also the owner of other small businesses around the store.

Questions to the manager of the store will be focus on the general information of the store.

1. The composition of the store
2. How many employees
3. What are the ethnic components of the employees?
4. How many customers per day

-
5. What are the ethnic components of the customer?
 6. what kind of food is the most popular one
 7. How is the business doing
 8. What do you think your store brings to the community?

Questions to the employees will focus on how they think about this store and how it changes their life in anyway.

1. What's your ethnicity
2. How long since you started to work here
3. What did you do before this job
4. Do you live in White Plains? If not, how far from here and how do you commute here?
5. How do you feel about working here
6. What do you like and dislike about this store

Questions to the customers will be a big part in the research:

1. What's your ethnicity
2. Where do you live
3. How often do you shop here
4. What kind of products do you come here for
5. Do you think this store made your life more convinced?
6. What do you dislike about the store?

7. Before this store was open, where did you buy your staff which you usually bought it here now?

8. For those who live in the neighborhood:

In your opinion, what's the most impact this store brings to the community?

I will also go to some nearby ethnic stores like small Hispanic store or Chinese store, to find out how it affects their business.

Questions:

1. When did you start your business?

Before or after Kam Sen's found (Kam Sen was founded in 2003)

2. How's your business doing after the found of Kam Sen?

3. Did it bring you some Asian customers? If yes, would you consider it as an important part of your business?

4. After Kam Sen was funded, what do you think the advantages and disadvantages it brings to your business?

After data collection, I will use the data to analyze the influence of Kam Sen Food to the community. Basically, the research will have two main sections – the good and the bad, analyze the economic, culture, environment and other effects it brings to the community.

I have two ways to organize the data. First one is by identity – manager, employee, customer, owner of other ethnic store, etc. This is aim to collect information from

different characters which will give me a more organized data from different aspect.

The second way will be by ethnicity. This aims to get the results to most of my questions.

The cost of my research will include transportation fees and printing fees for the questionnaires and interviews. The approximate figure would be five hundreds US dollars.

Chapter 4

Findings

Questions to the manager of the store will be focus on the general information of the store.

1. The composition of the store

We are Westchester's largest Asian supermarket featuring over 30,000 items in a sprawling 25,000 sq. ft space. We are located on the 1st floor of the White Plains Mall in the same building as the Department of Motor Vehicles. Not only can you find a wide variety of grocery items from China, Japan, Philippine, India, Thailand & Latin America, but you can enjoy food from our Chinese Hot Food section as well.

Here is a list of some of the popular items we offer:

- Japanese Sushi Counter
- Hong Kong Style Bakery
- Family Style Buffet Counter
- Cantonese Style BBQ
- Roast Pork
- Peking Duck
- Grade A meat
- Fresh Seafood
- Asian Fruits & Vegetables
- Chinese Herbs

-
- Tea Variety
 - Asian Snacks
 - Rice-Noodles
 - Chinaware

The sections are divided as:

One section carries general fruits and vegetables

One section carries general meat and sea food

Four sections carry only Chinese special food

One section carries Japanese and Korea food.

Two sections carry Hispanic food



Figure 1. The picture of Kam Sen Foods

2. How many employees

41 employees

35 full time + 6 part time

Male 25 Female 16

3. What are the ethnic components of the employees?

Chinese 25

Hispanic 8

Malaysians 6

Japanese 1

Philippines 1

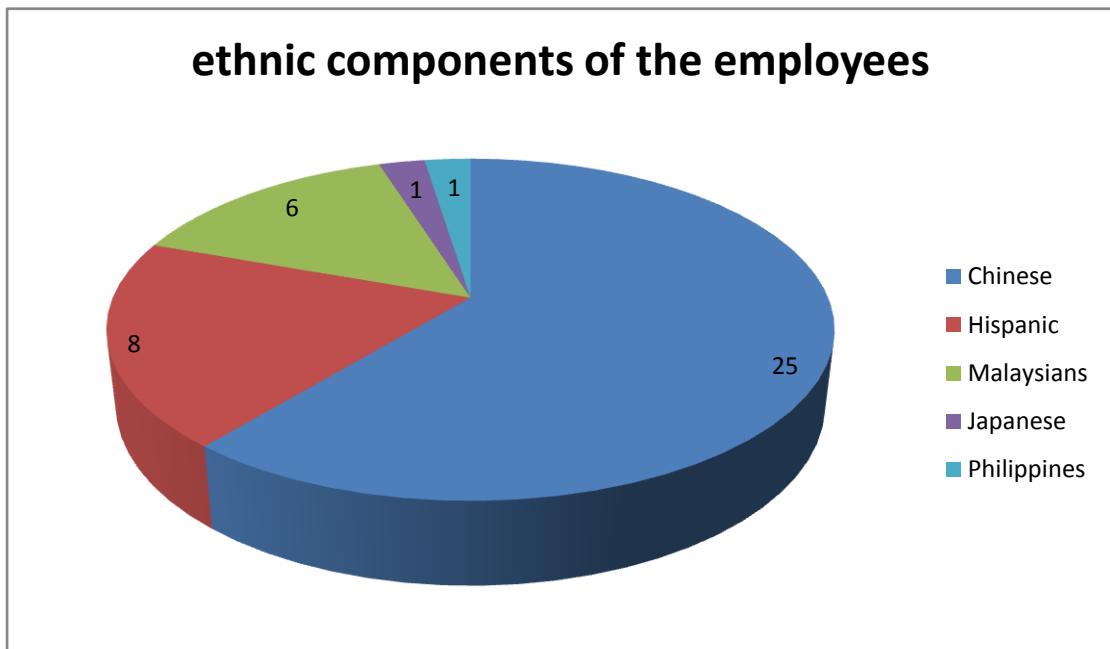


Figure 2. Ethnic components of the employees

4. How many customers per day

Weekday: normally 4 cashiers, each cashier 80~110 customers

Totally 320~440

Weekend: normally 7 cashiers, each cashier 140~200 customers

Totally 980~1400

5. What are the ethnic components of the customer?

According to the manager,

40% Chinese

30% Hispanic

30% other ethnic

6. What kind of food is the most popular one?

Chinese food

7. How is the business doing?

The store is doing OK, but not as good as the last two to three years.

8. What do you think your store brings to the community?

It gives the Asian community a chance to buy their own food in the neighborhood.

And we also provide food from other ethnic like Hispanic food which can make their life more convenient.

We brings lots of consumers to the community, stimulates the economy development of the community.

And it gives some employ opportunities to the local labors.

Questions to the employees will focus on how they think about this store and how it

changes their life in anyway.

I interviewed 14 employees.

1. What's your ethnicity

- A. Chinese
- B. Asian but not Chinese
- C. Hispanic

A. 3 3

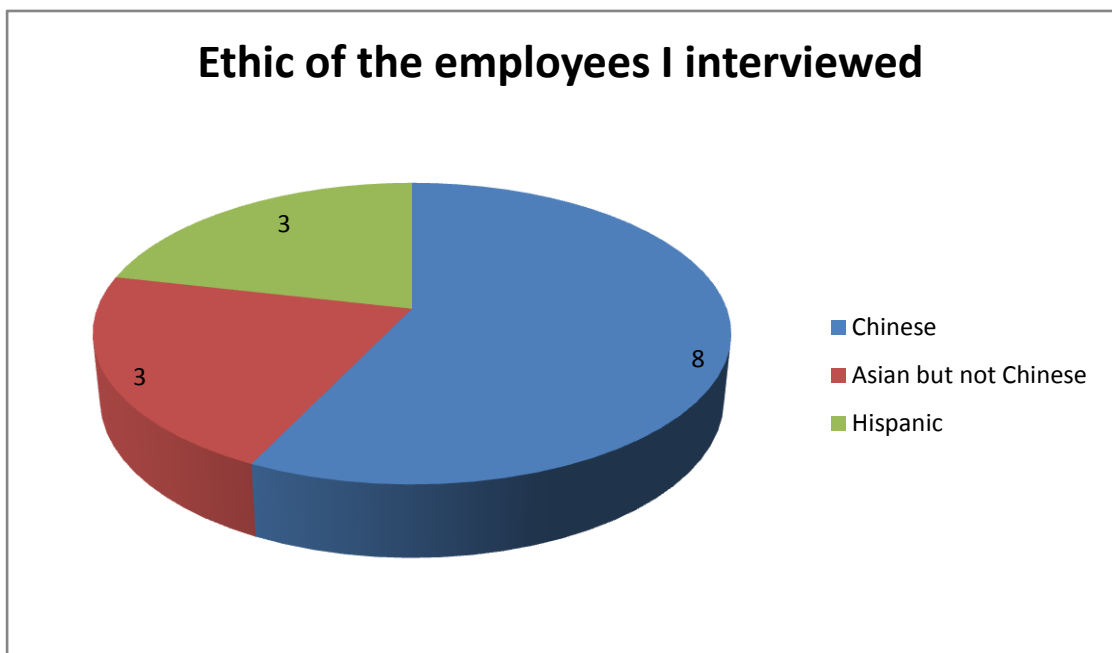


Figure 3. Ethic of the employees I interviewed

2. How long since you started to work here

- A. Less than three months
- B. Over three months but less than a year
- C. Over one year but less than three years

D. Over three years

Result:

A - 1; B - 4; C - 7; D - 2

3. What did you do before this job

A. Same level as in here

B. Higher level

C. Lower level

D. Unemployment

Result:

A - 6; B - 1; C - 4; D - 3

4. Do you live in White Plains? If not, how far from here and how do you commute here?

10 people live in Queens, they take the bus provides by the store to commute

2 people live in Westchester; they take metro-north train to work

2 people live in White Plains; they can walk to the store.

5. How do you feel about working here

13 employees gave me positive answers, they feel comfortable with the language environment that they know; and the store is not too busy like other Chinese Stores in Chinatown or Flushing.

1 employee suggested that the salary is not so good for him to support his family.

Questions to Customers

I interviewed 30 customers in two weeks

1. What's your ethnicity?

- A. Chinese
- B. Asian but not Chinese
- C. Hispanic
- D. Others

16 4 6 4

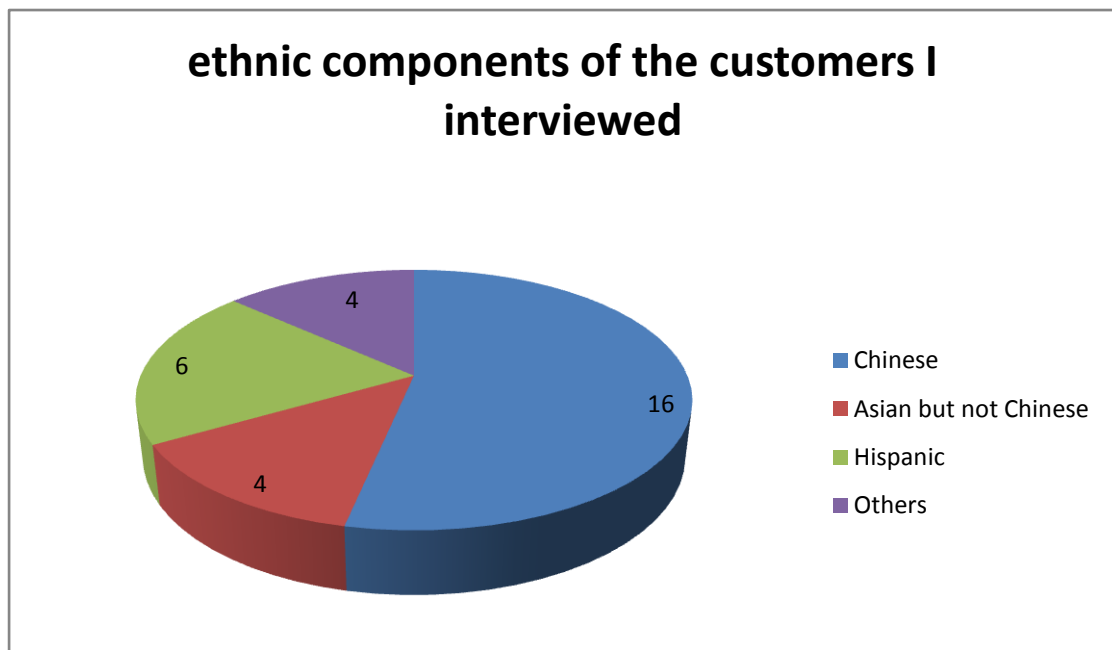


Figure 4. ethnic components of the customers I interviewed

2. Where do you live?

- A. White Plains

-
- B. Within 10 miles from White Plains
 - C. Within 30 miles from White Plains
 - D. More than 30 miles

Result:

A – 13; B – 10; C – 5; D – 2

- 3. How often do you shop here?
 - A. Almost every one to two days
 - B. Weekly
 - C. Monthly
 - D. More than a month

Result:

A – 6; B – 15; C – 5; D – 4

- 4. What kind of goods do you usually come here for?
 - A. Chinese stuff
 - B. General fruits, vegetable, meat or sea food
 - C. Hispanic food
 - D. no specific

Result:

A – 12; B – 9; C – 5; D – 4

5. Do you think this store made your life more convinced?

- A. Of course
- B. A little bit
- C. Not at all
- D. Hard to say

Result:

A - 21; B - 5; C - 0; D - 4

6. What do you dislike about the store?

- A. Price too high
- B. Shopping environment not so good
- C. Don't have what I want to buy
- D. Others (Please list it)
- E. None

Result:

A - 5; B - 2; C - 6; D - 5; E - 12

7. Before this store was open, where did you buy your stuff which you usually bought it here now?

Result:

- 1) 11 of the 16 Chinese said they used to go to Flushing or Chinatown to buy the Chinese products they need. Other Chinese said they will go to small local

Asian store to see if they have what they want.

- 2) Most of the Hispanics said they used to go to small Hispanic store to purchase food. Two of them said they went to big malls like Wal-Mart and Stop&Shop to buy what they want.
- 3) Whites come to this store mostly for Chinese products. They also went to Chinatown for Chinese stuff before the existence of Kim Sem.
- 4) Other Asians like Japanese went to their own ethnic stores.

8. For those who live in the neighborhood:

In your opinion, what's the most impact this store brings to the community?

Result:

80% of the interviewees believe that this store provides more conveniences to the life of local residents.

Interview with some of the small businesses in the neighborhood:

- I went to two small Chinese restaurants, two Hispanic grocery store and one Korean beauty store.

1. When did you start your business?

Before or after Kam Sem's found (Kam Sem was founded in 2003)

Result:

One Hispanic store was started after Kam Sem.

The other four were founded before Kam Sem.

2. How's your business doing after the found of Kam Sem?

The owner of the Hispanic store which was founded before Kam Sem said he doesn't think it affects his business that much. Maybe a little bit more of Chinese customers.

One Chinese restaurant: I talked to two servers there. According to them, Kam Sem doesn't affect them that much neither. One of them said maybe because that the main customers of small restaurants are local residents. They came here anyway no matter there is a big mall or not.

The only one who thinks that Kam Sem brings more customers is the Korean beauty store. The owner said after Kam Sem was founded, more Chinese and Hispanic customers came to her store. The difference between this store and the other four I interviewed is that this one located in the same mall of Kam Sem – White Plains Mall.

3. Did it bring you some Asian customers? If yes, would you consider it as an important part of your business?

All of them said Kam Sam brings them more Asian Customers, more or less.

The Korean store and one Chinese restaurant consider this as an important part of their business.

4. After Kam Sen was funded, what do you think the advantages and

disadvantages it brings to your business?

Both owner of the two Hispanic stores said in some way, it takes some of their customers away, especially Hispanic customers. During the weekends, people would go to Kam Sen instead of their small grocery store to buy more food for the next week.

The other three didn't give me any disadvantages.

Chapter 5

Analysis of findings

Analysis of information gathered from the store manager:

This is a really large grocery store and the composition of the store is complicated. Not just Chinese or Asian, it carries variety of products. This is the reason why the components of customer is also complicated - 40% Chinese; 30% Hispanic; 30% other ethnic. What I was expecting is 65-80 percent of Chinese customers because this is mainly a Chinese store.

The ethnic component of the employees shows that the employees of this ethnic store are all ethnic people, mainly Chinese. During the interview with the manager, he explained to me that the language factor is the main reason why they like to hire Chinese and Asian employees.

The four advantages of the store to the community, according to the manager, are convenience to the Chinese group; convenience to the local residents; economic development of the community and employment opportunities to the local labor force. But the further interview that I did with the employees and customers didn't support them all.

Analysis of information gathered from employees:

The results of the question "How long since you started to work here?" indicate that most of the employees have worked here between one to three years. I think this is a relatively stable job for them compared to other same level positions. Since only one

of them was working in a higher level position before this job, Kam Sen does bring good employment opportunities for those people to support their families.

But the employment opportunities are not for the local people as I thought before I did the interview. Most of the employees live in Queens and they take the bus of the company to commute from home to work. This result indicates that not all ethnic stores can bring employees opportunities to the local labor. Because there is a situation like this, the company would rather like to bring people from an ethnic community like Flushing in Queens is a living and shopping center of Chinese people.

The result of the last question shows that most of the employees are satisfied with working in their only ethnic group, although the money is not that good.

Analysis of information gathered from customers:

Customers of Kam Sen are mostly from White Plains and nearby towns and cities of Westchester County. And a big part of the customers come here weekly or even more often. So I think it means that Kam Sen is a very important resource of their everyday life.

Through question four, we can see the needs of customers are quite divers, although Chinese products are the most popular ones. Some Chinese people may come here only for Chinese stuff, but other ethnic customers also come here for general foods like fruits, vegetables and meats. So we can come to a comment that the existence of Kam Sen provides food and daily groceries for the community, not just Chinese or Asian but the whole community. The conclusion also can be proved by the result of

question five.

We can also find some problem of Kam Sen through question six. Some customers are complaining about the price. Through my observation, the price of the products here is higher than other big malls like Wal-Mart. Also the price of some Chinese products is much more expensive than in Queens and Chinatown. I think this is because of what we called monopolization. But it also could be that it is more expensive to do businesses in White Plains. People living in this community have the only option of Chinese products nearby.

Analysis of information gathered from small businesses in the neighborhood:

The effect of Kam Sen to those small businesses wasn't as big as I thought it would be. It has more effect on the beauty store which is located in the same mall. So the location is more important on this subject.

The disadvantages would be like the two Hispanic store owners said "it takes some of their customers away, especially Hispanic customers."

So if you ask what's the effect that a big ethnic store like Kam Sam brings to small businesses in the community? The answer would be a little complicated. It would bring more customers to businesses that are really close to it like the Korean beauty store located in the same mall. But it will take some of their customers away if they are selling the same products like the two Hispanic stores.

Chapter 6

Conclusion and recommendations

Research on ethnic diversity of U.S. cities has focused on how the growth of a particular population within a defined, geographic area fosters the emergence of an ethnically oriented business and labor market. While several studies have looked at ethnic economies in U.S. cities, comparatively little attention has been paid to how well these examples play in the community and what it brings to the community.

Kam Sen is a typical ethnic store in a typical U.S. city. The purpose of this research is to find out how an ethnic store like Kam Sen would perform in such a U.S. city and what it would bring to the community.

Through the research, I found there are three main advantages of Kam Sen to the community. The first one is convenience to local residents. The second one is to bring customers to some nearby small businesses. The last one is cultural impact which I didn't mention above. Because this is the factor that you can't measure by data, but I can feel it through the interview with customers and residents. Non-Chinese customers come to this store to buy Chinese products because they are attracted by the different culture, and they want to know more about it. The manager also mentioned that there are two Chinese language schools for kids in White Plains which were both started after Kam Sen. I will consider this as culture impact. So for investors and city planners who consider setting up an ethnic store in such an U.S. city, these would be the advantages you can think about.

But the research also shows a couple of disadvantages or there are some aspects that

are not as good as I thought. The first one is the question that if an ethnic store can bring lots of employment opportunities to the community. The answer would be no in the case of Kam Sen. They bring their employees from another community rather than hire labor locally. I can't say all ethnic businesses are like this. But this is a situation you should think about before any investment or planning.

Another disadvantage would be the effect to small businesses. If they sell the same product, more or less, it will take some customers away. So decision makers should consider this before making any decisions. On the other hand, through the research, I found the effect is not as big I thought it would be. It wouldn't make the small businesses go to the dead end.

The last problem is about prices. In the case of Kam Sen, the prices are relatively higher than other malls, especially Chinese products. As I mentioned above, it is because of monopolization. It is the monopoly of the Chinese market in White Plains even in Westchester. How to prevent the appearance of such a situation is a question for decision makers.

Generally speaking, the United States is an ethnically diversified country and the U.S. population is more ethnically diverse than ever before. People in the U.S. need such ethnic stores like Kam Sen. There are a lot of factors to be concerned with before you really act on it, advantages and disadvantages. After I did this research project, I would say the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. As a member of the ethnic group in the U.S., I would say I need ethnic stores like this in the neighborhood, so I can buy what I need to enjoy my own culture.



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