

Social Reinforcement of Environmentally Conscious Consumer Behavior at a Grocery Store Cooperative

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Abstract

Cooperative, natural grocery stores set themselves apart in many ways from the corporate, for-profit stores that are often seen as more mainstream in the United States. Created through local grassroots efforts, such cooperatives tend to support environmental efforts like local, sustainable and organic agriculture, and to offer environmentally friendly foods that are low on the food chain and/or contain little embodied energy. A feeling of belonging can be a powerful motivator to shop at the co-op, and even to join the organization. Such in-group experiences serve both to build and maintain relationships and to differentiate the cooperative from other grocery outlets, reinforcing the social preferences toward environmental conscious consumer behavior in such retail outlets. This qualitative study explores one local cooperative grocery store through a symbolic interactionism lens, asking whether and how community is built through shoppers' verbal interactions with co-op staff. Ethnographic methods are used to highlight and explore shoppers' interpretation of the "co-op" experience, and how that interpretation is communicated through social interaction. Themes found in the data indicate that both customers and staff see the community cooperative as not only a place to shop but also as a place to interact with likeminded people, about topics and issues integral to their sense of identity, especially in the area of environmentally conscious consumer behavior.

Keywords: cooperative grocery store, symbolic interactionism, environmentally conscious consumer behavior, social legitimation

1. Introduction

1.1 Environmental Issues and Consumer Behavior

There is a general alignment within the scientific community regarding the existence and severity of environmental issues such as climate change, degradation of environmental systems, and loss of natural environments and species (Anderegg, Prall, Harold, & Schneider, 2010; Hunter & Chen, 2011; Oreskes, 2004). Further, the negative environmental effects of industrial food production have become recognized by many in the scientific community, and efforts have been made to introduce consumers to options like organically, sustainably, and locally produced food (Carlson-Kanyama & Gonzalez, 2009; Dalgaard, Hitchings, & Porter, 2003; Hunter & Chen, 2011). While consumer awareness of environmental issues and more sustainable options has risen, as has expressed intent to purchase these foods, actual purchases of most consumers have not changed along similar lines (Carlson-Kanyama & Gonzalez, 2009; Kalafatis, Pollard, East, & Tsogas, 1999; Lockie, Lyons, Lawrence, & Mummery, 2002; Mainieri et al., 1997; Nolan, Schultz, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2008).

Because of the impact that humans' everyday consumptive behaviors have on the natural world, and in order to protect natural environments and the built environments of farms and ranches, it is necessary to understand how people's ordinary decisions and behaviors can be influenced toward greater sustainability (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Ukenna, Nkamnebe, Nwalizugbo, Moguluwa, & Olise, 2012). Moreover, environmentally conscious businesses need to better understand consumer behaviors (Berndt & Gikonyo, 2012; Leonidou & Leonidou, 2011; Tilikidou, 2013). This is particularly important if environmentally conscious businesses want to appeal to more mainstream consumers (Dupré, 2005).

This article explores the community-reinforcement interactions of customers and staff of a local cooperative

grocery store. Cooperative, natural grocery stores set themselves apart in many ways from the corporate, for-profit stores that are often seen as more mainstream in the United States. Created through local grassroots efforts, such cooperatives tend to support environmental efforts like local, sustainable, and organic agriculture; and tend to offer environmentally friendly foods that are low on the food chain and/or contain little embodied energy (International Cooperative Alliance, 2013).

Although cooperatives are not designed to make a financial profit, they must still build a strong business for their staff and shareholder members. Unfortunately, they and other “green” retail outlets often gain a reputation for being more expensive and/or less convenient than their more well-known competitors (Hiller Connell, 2010; ICA, 2013; Pirog & Rasmussen, 2008). Attracting new and existing customers must come from the unique elements that a cooperative can offer, such as, potentially, a sense of community among members and other shoppers of the cooperative.

1.2 Social Influences on Environmentally Conscious Behavior

Social behavior literature suggests that simple knowledge changes do not often predict environmentally conscious behavior change (Abrahamse, Steg, Vlek, & Rothengatter, 2005; Finger, 1994; Schultz, 2002; Steg & Vlek, 2009). In fact, findings have shown that external influencers to behavior, including social elements and environmental “nudges” like placement of recycling bins, can have a positive effect on environmentally conscious behavior (Guagnano, Stern, & Dietz, 1995; Ukenna, S. et al., 2012; Zepeda & Deal, 2010). In particular, social norms act as external influencers of environmentally conscious behavior, as shown in cases where norms impacted energy conservation (Nolan et al., 2008); “eco-conscious” clothing purchases (Hiller Connell, 2010); and recycling in the workplace (Nye & Hargreaves, 2009).

Environmentally conscious consumer behavior can be broken down into four types: purchasing and post-purchasing behavior (such as reusing purchased items) that is pro-environmental, recycling, and non-purchasing activities that are pro-environmental, such as using public transportation (Tilikidou, 2013). While the most salient such behavior to this study is purchasing behavior, recent research has found connections between these four types, and it has been shown that ecologically conscious consumers who display one type of behavior often also display the others (Peattie, 1995; Tilikidou & Delistavrou, 2007). Of course, social norms can act on environmentally conscious behavior in many ways, and consideration must be made of precisely how a norm may impact an individual’s behavior. Working within Elliott and Wattanasuwan’s (1998) symbolic model of the self, psychological well-being and self-identity are built through two dualities: material and symbolic resources, and individual and social processes. Each of the four elements plays a role: to what material resources we have access, the symbolic meaning we attach to those resources, how we interact internally with ourselves, and finally, the interactions we have with others around us and the results of those interactions. Social processes are vitally important to how we understand ourselves: “...it is only in the social realm, that these symbolic meanings become solidified and allow me to ‘complete’ the symbolic project of the self” (Jackson, 2005, p. 90).

1.3 The Impact of Social Interaction on Environmentally Conscious Consumer Behavior

Combining the acquisition of material goods and the social-symbolic interaction necessary for meaning making, it becomes clear that, in order to understand everyday consumption behavior, social interactions and other experiences in retail settings may play a very strong role and deserve more exploration as an important element of environmentally conscious consumption. Symbolic interactionism provides both a conceptual framework and a methodological lens through which to explore such relationships and better understand how social interactions impact behavior. Using the work of Blumer (1969) as a starting point, it is possible to explore what the interactions of cooperative grocery shoppers can tell us about how shoppers “exist in action” (p. 6), and what those interactions communicate about the roles cooperative groceries play in their lives.

One of the ways social interaction influences behavior is that of feelings of community within groups. People may choose to behave in more sustainable ways because doing so makes them feel like members of a community (Georg, 1999; Nye & Hargreaves, 2009). Using a social interactionism lens, it is possible to examine how people in groups interact in order to achieve social support and legitimization. How do people, through their interactions, build and strengthen the idea of a community that consumes in more sustainable ways? How do they reinforce the “normative rightness of continuing to live and behave in unconventional green ways” (Nye & Hargreaves, 2009, p. 144) that set them apart from the consumer society at large?

1.4 The Challenges of Researching Environmentally Conscious Consumer Behavior

Gaps exist in the literature addressing environmentally conscious consumer behavior. Overall, it is difficult to

detect and identify social influences on behavior, many of which act outside of the consciousness of the people involved (Nolan et al., 2008). While this aspect of human behavior has been investigated substantially over the last three decades, much of that investigation has been through quantitative means, particularly experiment and survey (Bargh, 2006; Nolan et al., 2008). However, these studies may attempt to remove a behavior from its context, or focus on easily quantifiable features of behavior at the expense of a fuller picture of the behavior and its social influences.

Using social interactionism methods, qualitative study offers techniques to examine such unconscious aspects of behavior. Social interactionism's Blumer (1969) insists that we "turn to a direct examination of the empirical social world," which comprises "the actual group life of human beings ... what they experience and do, individually and collectively, as they engage in their respective forms of living" (p. 35). Understanding how people interact in meaningful ways at the cooperative grocery store can help us understand how those people are drawn to and shop at the store as well, potentially illuminating how such support of sustainably-focused retail outlets can be encouraged among the larger population.

Further, there exists a gap in the literature in this particular area: understanding how interactions at a cooperative grocery store may reinforce feelings of belonging and social legitimation, thereby increasing the likelihood that these customers will continue or even increase their use of that store among their consumption choices. Since cooperative grocery stores cannot simply expect customers to come to their outlets looking for low prices, could social legitimation and reinforcement of feelings of belonging be potential tools for such grocery outlets? This study explores one of its elements: the in-store interactions. It is reasonable to expect customers to interact with staff members and other customers while shopping, in the satisfaction of the need for information, directions within the store, and so on. But what of other interactions?

1.5 Research Statement and Design

This qualitative study explores one local cooperative grocery store through a symbolic interactionism lens, asking whether and how community is built through shoppers' verbal interactions with each other and with co-op staff. Ethnographic methods are used to highlight and explore shoppers' enactment of the "co-op" experience. Further, these interactions are analyzed to better understand the types of personal, intimate interactions that make the store more than just a store in the eyes of its customers. This study focuses specifically on the interactions themselves, meaning that the distinction between the content of the interactions and their constructed meanings must be clear: without directly discussing such meanings with store customers, we cannot guess at what meanings they might be creating out of their interactions. We can, however, consider the connections between the types of topics and conversations taking place and the broader context of social legitimation and group reinforcement.

2. Methods

2.1 The Study and Its Context: "The Co-op"

This study took place at a small but full-service cooperatively owned and operated grocery store in a mid-size Midwestern city. The store, which will be referred to as The Co-op, has operated for nearly forty years and is a well-known and respected natural foods store in town and throughout the surrounding area. As is typical of customer-owned cooperatives, members of The Co-op participate in its administration through selection of Board members and voting on major policy changes. The Board in turn selects the General Manager, who is responsible for other hiring and for the day-to-day administration of the store. The Co-op also participates in community outreach activities and connects with local producers to bring local and sustainably grown products to the store. Non-members are welcome to shop at The Co-op, but some shopping benefits are derived from membership, such as member-only specials and once-a-month discount days. Some members choose to increase their participation in their cooperative, through volunteering in the store or at community events. There are currently over 3300 members of The Co-op.

The Co-op is an exemplary community cooperative grocery store as described by the International Cooperative Alliance (2013). Through strong community connections and a commitment to the ICA's Seven Principles of Cooperatives (2013), it has sustained itself as a successful cooperative business and set itself apart from many of the other grocery outlets in the area. Its mission statement includes concepts that guide its business decisions toward the support of sustainable food production and "green" food purchase behaviors:

- Good health through good nutrition
- High quality and natural foods
- High level of service

- Reasonable price
- Community of [city]
- Member-owned retail cooperative
- Equitable employment practices
- Support of local producers
- Consumer education
- Sustainable agricultural practices

The Co-op also dedicates much of its community support efforts to such activities in the community, partnering with local organic gardening groups, the state university's organic education program, as well as the state's sustainable agriculture association and Slow Food chapter.

The Co-op's store comprises about 5500 square feet, situated near the center of the city. It consists of six general areas, each of which has its own characteristics. Those areas include:

- Seating area near the front door
- Produce, dairy and bulk foods area
- Deli
- General grocery area (consisting of three aisles)
- Supplements and body care aisle
- Checkout and customer service area

While the store is much smaller than a typical "big box" store or supermarket, The Co-op calls itself "full-line," carrying foods of all types as well as household items and the aforementioned supplements, with an in-store bakery and kitchen that supplies its deli. The store works with over 100 local producers of sustainably-raised produce and meats, dairy products, and other products like pet treats and personal care products.

2.2 Qualitative Design: Participant Observation

It is recognized that qualitative study, and particularly ethnographic methods, are appropriate when studying behavior in public spaces and the personal meanings and other associations attached to those behaviors (Cattell, Dines, Gesler, & Curtis, 2007; May, 2005). Following the symbolic interactionism concept of studying everyday, real-life interactions, this study aimed to observe the ordinary interactions of customers, with staff and with other customers, at a community cooperative grocery store. Participant interaction provided the opportunity to observe such interactions as they occurred naturally, and to let the themes emerge organically as the conversation served the social needs of the customers. This ethnographic approach is appropriate when approaching cultural elements of group interaction (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2002).

The participant observation occurred over a three-week period, consisting of 15 two-hour sessions by one of the authors, henceforth identified as the researcher. The original plan was to observe only interactions between customers and staff, and the researcher expected to observe a fair number of those by sitting at the customer service desk near the front of the store. During initial project discussions with store management, however, they strongly suggested that the researcher both move about the store and include observations of customer-to-customer interactions. Their insider understanding of how social interactions occur in the store meant they had a better innate impression of where the researcher would encounter valuable interactions, and were persuasive in pulling the researcher into participant observation throughout the store.

The store management also suggested that the researcher take advantage of the possibility of becoming a member of the "staff", by donning a green store apron and Volunteer pin and fronting items on the store shelves. This would give the researcher a chance to move naturally about the store, give the researcher something useful to do while waiting for interesting interactions to emerge, and would enrich the study by helping to better understand how the store operated. The researcher carried a small notebook and pen in her apron pocket and kept alert for interactions as she fronted items in the three general grocery aisles of the store.

According to the store management, a good time to do observations was over the noon hour on weekdays. Arriving at 11:00 am and leaving at 1:00 pm each day, the researcher was able to observe both grocery shoppers and those buying (and sometimes staying to eat) their lunch from the deli. The researcher was given a locker in the staff area for personal belongings, shown where to pick up a clean apron each day, and told not to answer questions from customers but to direct them to a trained staff member (although the researcher was allowed to

direct someone to an item if the researcher knew where it was).

2.3 Selection of the Site and of Interactions

The Co-op was selected as the site for this study because of its ideal representation of a community cooperative grocery store. As described in section 2.1 above, The Co-op is dedicated to offering sustainably produced food and other items to its members and customers, and sees itself as integrated into the local community. The Co-op also embodies the typical advantages and disadvantages of a community cooperative grocery store. It offers products difficult to find elsewhere, is small and easy to navigate, and presents a friendly face to the public. However, it may also be seen by potential customers as expensive and limited in its offerings, a common difficulty for such cooperatives. This, and the willingness of The Co-op's management to participate in a qualitative, observational study, made it an ideal research site.

Selection of interactions was guided by the research question; after an early period of listening to any and all interactions happening in the store, the researcher focused on those that set themselves apart from what one would expect at a grocery store: asking directions, looking for particular store items, and interacting at the checkout lane. Any other interaction that took place within hearing was transcribed in as much detail as possible and included in the set of observation data. After each day's session, handwritten notes were transferred into electronic form, adding details and expanding on the written notes.

2.4 Data Analysis

To extract major themes (Merriam, 2002), the entire data set was read through and emerging themes recorded along with the number of the interaction within which those themes first appeared. The themes were then reviewed and organized into groups according to similarity within the context of the study. Each of these groups became a major theme, one of twelve. Those themes that involved ordinary store functioning were discarded (e.g. directions or store layout) as were those that were so common as to become useless to data analysis (e.g. saying 'hello' or 'goodbye'). Two major themes were further combined, Making a Living and Everyday Life, retaining the Everyday Life theme. This analysis work was reviewed by two external auditors (Creswell, 2013) who agreed with the process of analysis and the final themes. The emergent six major themes include:

- Sharing about Food
- Everyday Life
- Personal Connections
- Catching Up
- Helping Others
- Community Connection

Thematic analysis relates broadly to the inclusion of deep, community-affirming topics of conversation in interactions happening at The Co-op. These types of interactions occurred in all fifteen of the observation sessions, between customers as well as between customers and staff. Below, these themes are examined through the interactions themselves, and are connected to the literature on legitimation.

3. Results

3.1 Sharing about Food

The Co-op is, at its most basic, a grocery store. It is reasonable to expect conversations about food to regularly occur there. However, interactions around food at The Co-op were often not simply about, say, which tomato soup to buy, but also about more cultural and social aspects of food. For example, many customers commented to each other about the tastiness and healthfulness of the food The Co-op's deli had on offer. One customer told her companion, "I told him it was from The Co-op and he said 'Is it good for you?' I said 'Everything from The Co-op is good for you!'" As customers stood in line for their deli items, many would comment to each other about their preference for The Co-op's deli items over those of other local places. This reinforcement of their food choices serves to align themselves with each other, and with the values of the store: in this case, high quality, nutritious food. Similar such alignments can be found in conversations about qualities of The Co-op's grocery items, reinforcing a "green" norm:

Customer: "So you like these better [a type of sweet potato]?"

Staff: "Yes ... I think they're much more yummy, and all that Vitamin A!"

Customer: "Are they organic?"

Staff: "Oh yes."

One interaction involved a customer and a staff member at the fish counter. The two discussed at length their concerns with overfishing and being able to select the most sustainably fished products. The customer was not planning on buying anything that day, but simply investigating her options. The staff member was happy to discuss fossil fuels, the store's sustainable fishery signage, and even tell a personal anecdote about sardines while chatting with the customer. The customer in turn told the staff member about a recent book about cod and her conviction to live lower on the food chain. These conversations, in which both customer and staff member present themselves as people interested in organic and sustainably produced food, serve to provide what Nye and Hargreaves (2009) call a "safe context" within which customers (and perhaps staff members) can "discursively position their own green identities against the lifestyles and identities of others living in similar ways" (p. 144). It seems to be clear to customers that The Co-op is a place where sustainable and green ways of living are open for discussion.

3.2 *Everyday Life*

One of the most common interactions was talking about mundane topics: the weather and seasons, jobs and making ends meet, and even about the act of shopping itself. These interactions, although not necessarily deep and meaningful, often acted as a springboard for more intimate topics, or were interspersed throughout the conversation. One example involves two customers meeting unexpectedly in the store's deli area. They first asked one another what they were up to that day, chatting about one's "jeans day" at work and the other's day-long training session. But then one thanked the other about a card he had sent her, and the conversation became more personal. These types of interspersions were common in observations.

3.3 *Catching Up and Personal Connections*

It was very common for customers at the Co-op to run into people they knew. It was learned quickly that recording interactions between people who entered the store together was not likely to be productive; they tended to talk primarily about their shopping lists. But when friends and acquaintances met at the store, most often unexpectedly, they would have conversations that rarely centered on shopping, instead catching up on each other's lives, others they knew and even launching into highly personal topics of conversation. Staff and customers engaged in such conversations as well: in many cases staff and customers knew each other, and in others, personal connections were made between relative strangers.

One simple example of such an encounter happened between a staff member who specializes in supplements and personal care items, and a customer in search of a serum for her skin. The customer begrudged the time she'd spent in the sun as a young woman; the staff member leaned in, touched her arm and said, "You and me both, hon." Such commiseration was common between staff members and customers, whether in the spirit of salesmanship or community-building. From groaning over the "best chicken tortilla soup in town" to shaking heads about kids growing up too fast, these kinds of conversations happened every day during the two-hour observation sessions.

When customers met friends and acquaintances in the store, they discussed everything from the weather to medical prognoses and funerals. Often they would exclaim in delight when seeing each other, laugh and say things like, "Fancy meeting you here!" and "I would have known I'd see you here!" Such exclamations seemed to carry a sense of community in themselves: the fact that a friend could be found at The Co-op gave them an in-group label of "one of us." As what people own and buy becomes a part of who they are (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998), so where they shop is too a part of their identity, and sharing this experience with likeminded people can be a powerful reinforcement of this sense of identity.

Many customers would then engage in Catching Up: asking after each other's health, families and mutual acquaintances. Sometimes it was low-key:

Customer 1: "I'm sorry I couldn't come to your event the other night."

Customer 2: "I'll just keep inviting you."

Customer 1: "I don't go to half the things I'm invited to; but yeah, please do."

Customer 2: "I will."

Other times it was more serious:

Customer 1: "I'm feeling a beautiful energy here and we're feeling really blessed. We just love being here right now."

Customer 2: "Didn't you go to [another city]?"

Customer 1: "Yeah, we went out there thinking to do a yoga studio."

Customer 2: "Oh."

Customer 1: "But it really didn't feel good there."

Customer 2: "Oh!"

Customer 1: "Yeah, it was like sharks."

Sometimes Sharing about Food, part of the grocery shopping experience, was interspersed with Catching Up or Personal Connections: in one case, recipe sharing about different ways of eating kale took turns with catching up on the wellbeing of the two customers interacting. Another conversation involved both concern about the welfare of industrially farmed chickens, and compliments about the sewing expertise of one customer's mother, who had made her shopping bag. These common interactions served both to show aligned thinking about food and shopping choices, and to make more personal connections about the interacting people's lives.

Personal Connections between customers, or between staff and customers, could touch on very intimate topics. In one case, two customers who met for lunch from The Co-op's deli discussed the traumatic and life-threatening accident one customer had experienced as a teenager. An excerpt:

Customer 1: "I got stuck in a [machine] and I was stuck for an hour. It crushed my carpal; it was 3000 pounds of pressure. I lost so much blood ... So I have post-traumatic stress from that and it was so hard."

Customer 2: "Yeah, post-traumatic stress is so difficult. I think a big problem is people aren't diagnosed, or if they are they ignore it."

Discussions like this one are not at all related to grocery stores or food; but to the deeply personal experiences and internal states of the people involved. Although we cannot know from the conversation alone the meaning constructed between these two customers, we can know, as Blumer (1969) asserts, that the two are co-creating this meaning in a manner that strengthens their social connections and brings meaning to everyday interactions. Returning to Elliott and Wattanasuwan's (1998) symbolic model of the self, such social interactions are necessary to assign symbolic meaning to our lives, contributing to identity through personally interactive means. The unique element to this particular instance, and others observed in this study, is their occurrence in a grocery store.

While less common than other types of interactions, these deeply personal conversations happened intermittently throughout the study. One set of customers commiserated with one another's grief over the sudden decline and death of a mutual friend. Another group gathered to discuss their attempts at bringing support to a local group of recent refugees. A third exclaimed with one another about his medical close call. As he said, "You want to talk about dodging a bullet? There was a vigil by my bed that night! Where did that come from?" While not directly related to green food production and purchase, these conversations serve to bring people closer together, and build and strengthen relationships in a place frequented by all interaction participants.

A final Personal Connection interaction was unique in that it was, while very intimate, between strangers. In this case, two customers sat next to one another at the tables near the front door; one, an older woman, read a magazine while the other, a young man, filled out a store employment application. The woman began the conversation by asking the man for which job he was applying. After some exchange, she asked him about one of his tattoos. An excerpt follows:

Customer 1: "What does that mean on your arm?"

Customer 2: "Oh, that's an Eastern Orthodox cross; it's a spiritual reminder to stay in contact with that part of my life."

Customer 1: "Oh, that's good, it almost looked like the cross is crossed out; but you don't want to cross Jesus out of your life."

Customer 2: "No, no, you wouldn't be the first person to think that, but this part represents [inaudible]."

Customer 1: "My life is much easier now that I can cast; it's not that I don't have troubles and problems, but the strength is there. It's so much easier; I guess it's never too late to gain wisdom."

Customer 2: "Yes, I think it's important to find what works for you, and this works for me."

...

Customer 1: "Yes, I'm trying to have a stronger relationship with God."

Customer 2: “Yes, that’s right; that’s what’s important.”

This conversation was a unique but powerful example of how customers connected through their interaction at The Co-op. It and the other Personal Connections interactions seem to indicate that customers see The Co-op as a safe place not only for green conversations, but for intense and personal conversations, in which they can “be themselves” in more ways than one.

3.4 Helping Others

Not surprisingly, customers and staff members were observed helping each other: making more room in the seating area by the front doors, picking up each other’s dirty dishes and getting each other water, and helping locate important information about items in the store. Interestingly, however, these helpful interactions often happened between strangers, rather than simply between friends or family members who had entered the store together. It may be that customers and staff see others at The Co-op as not strangers per se, but rather members of a group—those who shop at The Co-op—and therefore people for whom it is natural to lend a hand.

In addition to acting helpful, the major theme of Helping Others included customers interacting about the work of helping. The aforementioned group discussing refugee issues was one such example. Consisting of several customers having coffee at the tables by the front door, this group had apparently met at The Co-op specifically for the purpose of comparing notes on several refugee situations:

- Helping a young mother learn English
- Helping several men, employed by a nearby meat-processing plant, improve their working conditions
- Helping an older woman with heavy responsibilities and probable mental illness
- Helping spread the word about the special needs of a particular cultural group in the area

Encouraging each other and offering suggestions, this group spent a fair amount of time engaging around their helping projects, reinforcing their group identity and, through being situated at The Co-op, reinforcing it as a place for people who Help Others. This finding agrees with Straughan and Roberts (1999) who found altruism explains ecologically conscious consumer behavior.

3.5 Community Connections

This theme refers to instances in which The Co-op, as an entity, was involved in or invited to community events. Aside from personal invitations, The Co-op itself seemed to be considered by community members as an organization that should be included in such events, or one that would be willing to share information about them with customers. A large wall by the checkout lanes was covered with posters and flyers relating to items like concerts, lectures and get-togethers, many though not all related to PEBs like recycling, supporting local food, and bicycling culture.

In one interaction, a customer finished her shopping and then stopped by the customer service desk, saying, “I wanted to let you know tonight there are three events going on in Lincoln; it’s amazing.” It seems that The Co-op is seen not only as a place to buy groceries, but also as a place to communicate and share about community happenings and ways to connect with other likeminded people.

4. Discussion

Returning to the research question, the results show clearly that potentially meaningful, community-reinforcing interactions happened regularly at The Co-op. While people come there to shop, they also may see it as a place to interact with likeminded people, about topics and issues integral to their sense of identity. Customers and staff members alike display a level of comfort in having not only typical shopping interactions, but also those that might expose their inner selves to social scrutiny; at The Co-op, it seems, they can be “who they are” in both green and other meanings of the phrase. This lends support to the ideas expressed by Nye and Hargreaves (2009), in that these shoppers at The Co-op find social legitimation through their social interactions at The Co-op that they might not find at other types of grocery stores. It would be illuminating to repeat this study at such other stores in the local area, in order to compare social interaction and to determine the uniqueness of The Co-op’s shopping environment.

What does this study say about “who they (The Co-op’s customers) are”? They do seem to be people who are interested in sustainably and locally produced, and healthy, food. They come to The Co-op expecting such options, and express pleasure both at the prospect of eating the food they find there and in talking about the food as well. They share information with each other about green issues and concerns, displaying their knowledge base about environmental issues and their identity as people who care about the environment. They also share an

interest in each other, social connections and helping others. This builds a picture of a socially connected, informed customer who enjoys good food and leans on the co-op community for emotional and social support.

The qualitative nature of this study and its focus on social interaction add to the literature surrounding environmentally conscious consumer behavior in its illumination of how shoppers truly act, in their natural shopping environment, without imposing the limits inherent in experimental and survey methods. While the literature acknowledges the importance of social normative influences on both consumer and environmentally sustainable behavior, there are few examples of real-time social shopping behaviors in current studies. This study provides a glimpse into the social interaction of a specific group of consumers, and illustrates Blumer's (1969) assertion that people build meaning through their interactions: in this case, within their grocery shopping experience.

Further, this study suggests that environmentally conscious consumer behavior is connected to several, inter-related identities. The Co-op's customers reinforced those identities through their interactions. These normative experiences, and the power they may have on behavior, can help both researchers of consumer behavior and retail outlets themselves to understand those elements of environmentally conscious consumer behavior that are often hidden from view. While small cooperative stores may not be able to offer deep discounts and one-stop shopping, they may be able to encourage the community-building social interaction that seemed so central to the shopping experience of The Co-op's customers and members.

5. Limitations and Future Study

This study employed a necessarily narrow approach. First and foremost, it would be highly beneficial to build a set of interviews into the research design of a future study. Qualitative research in general, and symbolic interactionism in particular, stress the importance of the emic perspective; meaning must be formed with and determined by the cultural group under study. This kind of interpretation was not possible when conducting solely participant observation; while the study offers a rich understanding of what people talked about and how they talked, it is not possible to know the meaning they were building with each other as they talked. One of the foundational concepts of symbolic interactionism, delineated by Blumer (1969), makes the necessity of this next step clear:

Since action is forged by the actor, out of what he perceives, interprets and judges, one would have to see the operating position as the actor sees it, perceive objects as the actor perceives them, ascertain their meaning in terms of the meaning they have for the actor, and follow the actors line of conduct as the actor organizes it—in short, one would have to take the role of the actor and see his world from his standpoint (p. 73–74).

Knowing the world of The Co-op cannot be possible without interacting directly with The Co-op's actors themselves.

Another limitation of this study derives from the choice to observe interactions as a background figure, without making observations known at that time. This decision was made deliberately, with the realization that the management of The Co-op would not allow observation of customer interactions if the researcher, either beforehand or afterwards, interrupted customers' shopping and interactions in order to tell them about the study. This intrusive and repetitive action on my part would interrupt the smooth functioning of the store. This design removed the possibility of following up interaction observation with member-checking or questions about their meaning-making.

It is also necessary to make connections between behaviors, interactions and meaning, and the mundane but important and necessary financial bottom line. Do community-building and legitimation behaviors correlate with purchasing behaviors? Do cooperative grocery store shoppers who identify with its culture spend more money there than those who do not? Finally, could such strong group identities perhaps backfire in cooperative cases, creating in-group and out-group conflicts that keep "outsiders" from joining or even shopping at cooperative grocery stores? These questions must be answered in order to fully understand how social elements of identity can be used in encouraging environmentally conscious consumer behavior among the larger population.

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