

# The Role of the Bodega in a U.S. Puerto Rican Community

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*The present study examines the neighborhood grocery store, or "bodega," through a personal interview survey conducted among bodega owners and managers in a Puerto Rican barrio in Philadelphia. We attempt to update and build on Kizilbash and Garman's research on grocery retailing in Hispanic neighborhoods conducted over fifteen years ago. A matched sample of Anglo grocery retailers was surveyed as well, supplemented by responses from Hispanic and Anglo consumers. Along with providing a nearby location for convenient purchases, the bodega was found to serve the important role of maintaining Latin culture.*

## INTRODUCTION

Understanding the behavior of Hispanics is of major importance in today's United States marketplace. The Hispanic market is one of the fastest-growing in the country, having increased at a rate of 62 percent over the last nine years from 14.6 million persons in 1980 (Strategy Research Corporation 1989). The growth of the Hispanic market is mostly based on new immigration that has changed both the language use patterns and the buying patterns of the existing U.S. market. Hispanic purchasing power is also increasing. The spendable income of U.S. Hispanics is projected at about \$159.2 billion in 1990, compared to \$84 billion ten years ago, expressed in 1990 constant dollars (Council of Economic Advisers 1991; Valencia 1989).

It is a fallacy to assume that traditional marketing strategies will be successful with Hispanic consumers, or even that the Hispanic market can

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We would like to thank Alex De Soto, Art Director of Davis Advertising Inc., for his excellent photographic work on Philadelphia bodegas.

be approached as one homogeneous group. Instead, some variance can be found among Cubans, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and South Americans in specific areas of shopping behaviors (Wilkes and Valencia 1984). There are also differences among Hispanics according to current region of residence; media preferences of Mexican-Americans, for example, are found to vary somewhat across households within selected U.S. cities (Sorucu 1991). Valencia (1982) has also found significant differences in the shopping orientations of Mexican-Americans depending on whether they reside in San Antonio (Tex-Mex) or in Los Angeles (Cal-Mex). Moreover, unique market-related behaviors have been identified among high and low acculturated Hispanics (Deshpande, Hoyer, and Donthu 1986; Hayes-Bautista, Schinck, and Chapa 1984; Hernandez and Kaufman 1989; O'Guinn and Faber 1986; Valencia 1985).

In the present study, the focus is on the Puerto Rican community. The second largest Hispanic subgroup after Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans represent about 12 percent of Hispanics in the United States (Strategy Research Corporation 1989). According to the Census Bureau, there are approximately 2.3 million Puerto Ricans residing in the U.S., many of whom live in the New York and Philadelphia markets.

Demographic projections forecast the Hispanic population to reach about 40 million by 2015, underscoring the importance of studying this market (Ghosh 1990). However, extensive research regarding the Hispanic consumer and retailer exchange process is performed by some firms and seemingly ignored by others (Goerne 1990). Firms like Seven-Up, Coors, and Publix Supermarkets have conducted on-site research in neighborhood fairs and community stores with profitable results; other companies often rely on quick studies or simple translation of Anglo messages, leading to embarrassing mistakes and ineffective strategies (Brown 1991; Lieblich 1988). When executives and managers of consumer packaged-goods firms were surveyed, 92 percent agreed that the Hispanic market "will continue to grow and become more important in years to come"; they also agreed that many widely-held views regarding Hispanic marketing are unresolved issues, only beginning to be correctly researched (Albonetti and Dominguez 1989).

We propose that there is a clear void in the retail marketing literature on the topic of grocery retailing in Hispanic neighborhoods. Academic research on grocery retailing in Hispanic neighborhoods is limited to the study conducted by Kizilbash and Garman in 1975. However, retail chains, such as Fiesta Marts and Vons Tianguis, have generated considerable sales dollars as a result of their grocery research, largely built on examining Hispanic supermarkets, grocery stores, cantinas, and restau-

rants (Corchado 1989). The Mexican American Grocers Association (MAGA) reports that retailers have increased their sophistication in marketing to Hispanics, but that the market is diverse and complicated (Weinstein 1990), needing further development and closer examination.

One specific institution in the marketplace has been a traditional mainstay in Hispanic communities of the United States, the neighborhood grocery store, or "bodega." This center of social activity has prevailed in the barrios, and is often thought to provide services not obtainable in supermarkets or other grocery stores. The present study focuses on profiling the bodega in one specific Hispanic subcultural setting, the Puerto Rican neighborhood. We choose to study one such neighborhood and its corner grocery stores in order to provide a description of this enduring marketing institution. In order to do so, a personal interview survey was conducted with bodega owners and managers in several specific Census tracts in the Philadelphia area which were predominantly Puerto Rican, with an Anglo control sample studied as well. Our goal was to provide some insight into the retail processes, promotional methods, coupon redemption, and level of community support. Comparable samples of consumers in both Hispanic and Anglo markets were interviewed also.

The present study represents a potentially significant contribution to the literature in view of the data and methodological limitations of the Kizilbash and Garman research. The information provided in that study is somewhat outdated since the study was conducted over fifteen years ago, and the Hispanic grocery store environment has changed substantially since then. Several of the limitations of the Kizilbash and Garman (1975) research are addressed in the following ways: (1) probability sampling was used to sample the grocery retailers in both the Puerto Rican and Anglo neighborhoods, as opposed to the non-probability sample in the 1975 work; (2) the bodegas were compared with Anglo grocery stores, to distinguish characteristics shared by all "neighborhood grocery stores" from those of bodegas; and (3) samples of Puerto Rican and Anglo consumers were interviewed regarding their perceptions of the bodega.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM**

### **The Retail Perspective**

The small neighborhood grocery store has been an enduring institution within the Hispanic community. Rather than exhibiting the reduction in popularity forecasted by Kizilbash and Garman (1975), the bodega has prevailed as an integral part of the typical makeup of the barrio culture.

According to several reports, bodegas have served as social gathering centers in ethnic neighborhoods—providing advice on finding a home, buying an automobile, or obtaining employment—trading such services for store loyalty through a relationship of mutual dependency (Kizilbash and Garman 1975; Koss 1965). Additionally, the maintenance of homeland ties through what Agins (1985) terms “an oasis of Latin culture” is accomplished in an atmosphere of social interaction, gossip, and neighborly community. Although generally unmarked in terms of traditional store signage, colorful painted murals are often found to characterize the bodega exterior (Penalosa 1990). The average bodega purchase is only about \$10, and most customers visit the neighborhood bodega almost every day (Sains 1989).

*Supermarket Business* reports that similar findings resulted from in-depth research on both Mexican and Mexican-American food shopping habits conducted by the management group for Tianguis, a Hispanic-oriented supermarket in Los Angeles. Based on these findings, a strategy was developed which stresses the community aspects of shopping, family values, and the neighborhood. Employees are bilingual, Hispanic brands and products are featured, and characteristics such as freshness are emphasized (Hughes and Coupe 1987).

Bodegas also constitute the essential links in the distribution of products to the Hispanic market. For instance, sales in bodegas can represent 30 to 50 percent of the total New York Hispanic sales for certain products (Guernica and Kasperuk 1982). Bodegas frequently are the only groceries within walking distance of neighborhood shoppers, and shelves often abound with rice, canned beans, and tropical produce. Competition for shelf space is often fierce, since bodegas are usually small, ranging from about 1,200 to 1,500 square feet (Sains 1989).

### **The Consumer Perspective**

Other researchers have examined retail variables by surveying Hispanic consumers on their preferences and behaviors. Much of their work focuses on examining the consumer behavior of Mexican-Americans, although more recent studies have investigated other Hispanic subgroups, such as Puerto Ricans (Hernandez and Kaufman 1991). Several topics have been addressed, including language, store environment, and brand loyalties.

**Language Used.** Immigrants to Canada and the United States frequently report maintaining their native languages after migrating for use in various situations, such as reading, shopping, and conversation (Laroche, Kim, and Joy 1990; O’Guinn and Faber 1985). As a result, Hispanics, specifi-

cally Mexican-Americans, are thought to prefer stores where Spanish is spoken (Saegert, Hoover, and Hilger 1985). However, such language preferences may vary with level of acculturation, with Puerto Rican Hispanics who are more acculturated preferring to communicate in English more than those Hispanics who less acculturated (Hernandez and Kaufman 1991).

**Small Store Preference.** Immigrants also report a preference for shopping in small stores that cater to their specific needs, such as neighborhood grocery stores (Moffett 1986; Saegert, Hoover, and Hilger 1985). Saegert et al.'s sample offered some support that Mexican-American consumers are more drawn to familiar stores and consider "convenience-store features" as important in selecting a supermarket. However, these two factors were least important to Hispanics, while the additional factors of product quality, price, and shopping ease were weighted more heavily by both the Hispanic and non-Hispanic respondents.

Among Mexican-American shoppers, Hayes-Bautista, Schinck, and Chapa (1984) identified some differences between the foreign and the native-born in selecting a food store. The overall Hispanic pattern resembles that of non-Hispanics, with friendly clerks, fast service, and quality of vegetables and fruit being the top three characteristics for both native and foreign-born Hispanics. The foreign-born, however, place more importance on the presence of Spanish-speaking personnel and on low prices than do natives.

**Brand Loyalties.** Ethnic group consumers are thought to demonstrate brand loyalties to imported products from their homelands and to domestically-produced goods that are directed at ethnic markets (Hayes-Bautista, Schinck, and Chapa 1984; Segal and Sosa 1983). These brand loyalties would suggest an important reason for bodega patronage since bodega shelves are typically stocked with such products. Saegert, Hoover, and Hilger (1985), however, state that their research fails to support the idea that Hispanics are more brand loyal than non-Hispanics. A related issue that may affect assessment of brand loyalty concerns the actual frequency of use of certain products. The usage patterns of certain body-care products are found to differ between Anglos and Mexican-Americans (Wallendorf and Nelson 1986). For example, Mexican-Americans are found to use more cosmetics and hair-care products than Anglos. It would be interesting to examine whether brand loyalty is affected when actual product volume used is taken into consideration.

### **A Retailer-Consumer Perspective**

The studies reviewed here reveal a complex picture of preferences regarding store size, language for shopping, attributes for store selection,

and brand loyalties. From the consumer perspective, membership in a given Hispanic subgroup, level of acculturation, and foreign- versus native-born status appear to stimulate preferences for certain retail characteristics. The limited retail perspective gives a fairly uniform picture of the bodega, oriented around social services and cultural maintenance. However, the studies reviewed above did not address whether similar concerns and observations were evident for both consumer and retailers.

Added understanding is found by considering what both retailers and consumers in the same community report about specific preferences and problems regarding small grocery stores. This study attempts to provide such a matched perspective, as unique insights are available from each side of the transaction. The responses of consumers and retailers can be compared to identify if they report the same, similar, or widely discrepant perceptions of the services, strengths, and characteristics of the bodega in their communities. In addition, assessment of retailers' perceptions can uncover problems that the consumer does not report, perhaps because of embarrassment or social pressure. Moreover, retailers are likely to reveal other intra-channel barriers which impede consumer patronage, such as lack of manufacturer support for coupon redemption (Kaufman 1990).

## METHODOLOGY

### Overall Design

In the summer of 1988, consumer and retailer surveys were conducted in two neighborhoods, one Puerto Rican and one Anglo, in north Philadelphia. Both Anglo and Hispanic samples were chosen to obtain approximate "matched" samples, controlling for the effects that subculture, socio-economic status, and store size may have on grocery retailing. Following Barban and Grunbaum (1965), the sampling frame was limited to six Hispanic and two Anglo tracts in which the family income was below the median income range prevailing for each group in the Philadelphia area. Some of the questionnaire and sampling methods were adapted for either the retail or consumer survey; these are described below.

Field research methods must be undertaken with care in examining the barrio. Typical research techniques, questionnaire formats, sampling decisions, and data collection must be carefully modified to capture the essence of the barrio. For instance, technical retail terminology, such as "shelf-space allocation," is simply not meaningful to a neighborhood grocer who measures his stock by the yardstick of "having enough" to meet his customers' needs (Kaufman and Hernandez 1990). Moreover,

many of the selected addresses in the consumer sample were vacant, boarded up, or torn down, necessitating replacement, and drug dealers were frequently encountered when surveying this type of low-income neighborhood (Hernandez and Kaufman 1990).

### **Method of Administration**

A personal interview survey was selected due to the rather low incidence of telephones within the Hispanic grocery stores, low ownership in Hispanic homes (Strategy Research Corporation 1989), the necessity to speak to the owner or person in charge, and the rather low literacy levels in the Hispanic Census tracts. (A mail survey was rejected for these reasons.) Since Census information suggested that approximately 40 percent of the Hispanic residents of the six tracts either spoke no English at all or did not speak it well, questionnaires were prepared in both English and Spanish for use by the Hispanic retailers and consumers.

The interviews were conducted by the authors, reading all the survey questions to the respondent, after determining the language of preference for Puerto Rican participants. The researchers identified themselves as representing their individual academic institutions, showing identification when requested. Retail respondents were required to be the bodega owner or manager; if he or she was not available or able to conduct the interview when contacted, a mutually-agreeable time was set. If a consumer respondent was not at home, not able to conduct the interview at the time of initial contact, or was not the appropriate household member to respond, the interviewers attempted to determine a more satisfactory time to call from either the respondent, the household member, or neighbors. Times of day were flexible and varied, depending on the preferences of the respondents. Care was taken to avoid mealtimes and certain hours late in the afternoon, which in the Anglo community were commonly set aside for rest, food consumption, and television viewing. A minimum of two callbacks were attempted, with replacement of noneligible households using random selection methods.

### **Questionnaire Development**

Questionnaires were first written in English and then translated into Spanish. Next, a bilingual translator back-translated the Spanish version into English. Discrepancies between the two versions were identified and these sections were reworded.

The questionnaires were pretested in order to identify any potential difficulties in clarity, confusion by the respondent, and scale problems.

Some five-point Likert-type scales were found to be difficult for the retailers to interpret, while some questions required the retailer to respond based on inadequate knowledge of consumer feelings. These questions were eliminated, so as not to confound the study. Some other questions were left open-ended, such as why coupons were not accepted, and the advantages of grocery stores over supermarket. Hispanic retailers and consumers often confused cents-off coupons with welfare coupons, or food stamps. In order to overcome this difficulty, a visual aid was used with examples of cents-off coupons displayed in English and in Spanish, to ensure that the coupon questions were clearly understood.

Several of the items used in the retail questionnaire were taken directly from the inventory used by Kizilbash and Garman (1975). In addition, the survey requested detailed self-report information on discount coupon acceptance, perceptions regarding coupon availability and problems, provision of various store services, and advertising media used. The retailers were also asked to report on the advantages they felt that their store offered in comparison to supermarkets, as well as price perceptions. Demographic measures were taken for the respondent, including ethnic origin, sex, age, and education.

Personal observation was also used to describe each store in terms of its location, use of signs or murals, and displayed acceptance of coupons and food stamps. The use of specials or discounts was noted, as were posted store days and hours of operation.

### **Sample Design**

Six Census tracts were drawn from a predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood in the city of Philadelphia. These tracts were selected because, according to the 1980 Census, they had the highest concentration of Spanish origin residents in the Philadelphia SMSA, ranging between 45 and 69 percent. Two other contiguous tracts were selected to form the Anglo sample. In contrast, whites in these latter tracts comprised about 98 percent of the population.

**The Retail Sample.** The telephone directory was found to be an incomplete sampling frame, due to low telephone ownership, rapid turnover in ownership, frequent store closings, and inaccurate listings. As an alternative method, the six Hispanic and the two Anglo Census tracts were canvassed by automobile, using detailed city planning maps, to obtain a current, accurate name and address for each grocery store. City telephone books were used to verify and supplement the observations, although the listings were frequently found to be inaccurate or outdated.

The Hispanic tracts had 123 grocery stores within the selected Census boundaries, while the Anglo tracts yielded a total of 37 grocery stores. Fifty Hispanic grocery stores were selected, adopting Kizilbash and Garmann's sample size, using proportionate stratified sampling by Census tract to determine the number of grocery stores to be sampled in each Hispanic tract. The individual sampling fractions were determined by dividing the number of grocery stores per tract by the total grocery stores in the overall Hispanic area. Next, a random number table was used to determine which Hispanic grocery stores from each tract would become part of the sample. All 37 Anglo retailers in the two Anglo tracts were included as part of that sample. In both the Hispanic and Anglo samples, the sampling unit corresponded to the owner of the grocery store, or the person in charge of the grocery store.

**The Consumer Sample.** Two-stage area sampling, using residential blocks as clusters, was used in selecting both samples of consumers. A total usable sample of 269 was obtained. The Hispanic sample included 186 completed questionnaires for a 95 percent response rate. Eighty-three interviews were completed among Anglo respondents for a response rate of 79 percent. The lower response rate from the Anglo sample seems to be due in part to a historic dislike for outsiders and researchers among residents of this Philadelphia neighborhood (Binzen 1970).

The unit of analysis was the person who reported doing most of the grocery shopping in each selected household. The majority of respondents in both samples were predominantly female, with median age between 35 and 44. Approximately 40 percent were married couple households, with median household size of four (Hispanic) or three (Anglo). Over 60 percent of the Hispanic respondents were housewives, and only 37 percent had at least a high-school diploma. This contrasts with a 30 percent housewife classification among the Anglo sample, with almost 70 percent having a high-school diploma or higher. Median household income for the Hispanics fell in the \$5,000 to \$9,999 range, with the Anglo median income slightly higher, between \$10,000 to \$14,999. Sixty percent of the Hispanics used food stamps, versus an 18 percent usage rate among the Anglo respondents.

### **Bodega Location and Description**

Store locations were similar among both the Hispanic and Anglo grocery stores. Isolated, corner locations were the norm for the majority of stores in both samples, independent of ethnic group served. Stores frequently changed hands, but maintained the same address. The name of the previous

store, often the name of the prior owner, was often retained to ensure continuity. Sixty-six percent of the bodegueros and 84.4 percent of the Anglo retailers surveyed reported that another store had existed at the same location prior to their current ownership.

There were no store signs for 78 percent of the Hispanic groceries, although several bodegas were observed with signs advertising "Hershey Foods." In contrast, 97 percent of the Anglo stores had prominent store signage. Murals were also used differently—pastoral scenes such as nature, trees, and gardens were encountered on 16 percent of the bodegas, often on the long outside wall at a corner location. Forty-four percent of the Anglo grocery stores also had painted murals, although those instead generally exhibited a manufacturer's logo, such as "Dietz and Watson" cold cuts. Signs indicating that food stamps are accepted were not prominent, and were only noticeably displayed among 22 percent of the Hispanic and 39.4 percent of the Anglo retailers. Approximately 20 percent of both samples of retailers had public telephones outside their stores.

Figure 1 shows the corner location of a bodega which combined store signage with an elaborate mural providing information about the store. Hours of operation and acceptance of food stamps were prominently and colorfully featured. Produce featured in boxes on the sidewalk also formed an attractive, functional display for shoppers.

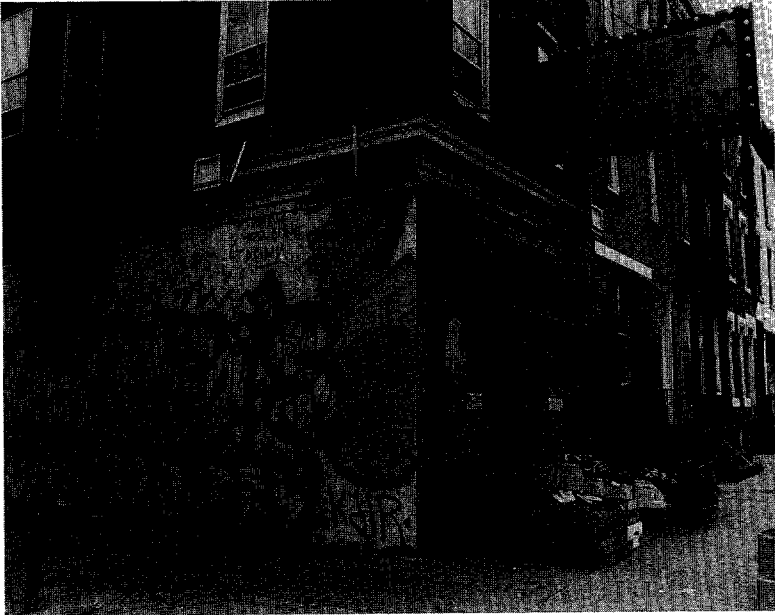
### **Bodega Patronage**

**Supermarket Versus Corner Store: Visits and Expenditures.** Both samples of consumers were asked to estimate their number of monthly supermarket visits and weekly corner store visits. The Hispanic respondents indicated a mean of approximately 4.5 visits to the supermarket per month, as opposed to the Anglo mean of 8.2 visits, or double the Puerto Rican frequency. However, the Puerto Ricans spent more money on each supermarket trip than Anglos, the former spending an average of \$116 per trip, with the latter spending an average of \$94 per visit. These figures are slightly higher than those reported by the Food Marketing Institute, which indicates that Hispanics spend almost \$100 a week on groceries, compared with \$74 for general-market households (Fisher 1990). Penalosa and Gilly (1986) caution that the characteristics of Hispanic household structure and composition may be responsible for part of this expenditure difference. That is, Hispanic households spend approximately one-fourth more of their disposable income on food than do non-Hispanics, due to the larger size of the average Hispanic household.

FIGURE 1

**The Exterior of a Corner Bodega Reveals a Store Sign, Mural, and Sidewalk Produce Display**

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The corner stores were patronized much more often than the supermarkets within both groups. Puerto Rican shoppers reported a mean of 6.25 grocery trips per week, versus the Anglo 3.7 trips per week, or about half the Puerto Rican frequency. Puerto Rican households in the sample spent an average of \$8.83 per trip while Anglos spent a bit more—an average of \$9.06 per trip. Studies grouping Hispanics of mixed origin in East Coast markets identified that the average bodega purchase approximated \$10, with daily visits also a typical behavior. Average sales transactions are estimated to be about \$3.00 for convenience stores in general (Berman and Evans 1989), so it appears that patrons in both Philadelphia samples relied more heavily on such purchases than do mass market consumers. However, the frequency of bodega visits suggests that the corner store plays a much more integral role in the daily lifestyle of the Hispanic sample than that of the Anglo group.

Since automobile usage is often necessary for shopping trips to the supermarket, the respondents were also asked if they had a car available for

shopping. Over 66 percent of the Hispanics usually or always had a car available, comparable to 69.9 percent of the Anglo respondents.

**Supermarket Versus Corner Store: Reasons to Buy.** The Hispanic and Anglo retailers were asked to report the advantages they perceive that small grocery stores provide for their customers, as opposed to the benefits gained through supermarket shopping. The respondents were allowed to give more than one response; the results of combining their first two responses are presented in Table 1A. Of the most frequent responses, 57.5% of the Anglo retailers report that convenience is their primary benefit, whereas 36% of the Hispanic retailers reported that "closeness to the customers' homes" is valued.

The consumer samples provided a complementary perspective. Table 1B profiles the top reasons for shopping at a corner grocery store, while Table 1C presents the reasons for shopping at supermarkets. Among Hispanic consumers, a location close to home is clearly most important for bodega

TABLE 1A\*

**Retailers' Perceptions of Corner Store Advantages in Comparison to Supermarkets**

Advantages of your store compared to a supermarket	Hispanic Retailers	Anglo Retailers
7 days/long hours	20.0%	12.1%
Fill-ins/emergencies	10.0%	6.1%
Small amounts	4.0%	6.1%
Convenience	10.0%	57.5%
Know customers personally	16.0%	6.1%
Customized service	0.0%	15.2%
Quick purchase	12.0%	6.1%
Closer to customers	36.0%	9.1%
Credit	10.0%	0.0%
Prices same or less	20.0%	12.1%
If money short let go	6.0%	0.0%
Freshness and quality	2.0%	9.1%
Specials	2.0%	0.0%
Selection same as supermarket	2.0%	0.0%
5-cent candies available	4.0%	0.0%
Delivery	2.0%	0.0%
Language	4.0%	0.0%

TABLE 1B

**Consumer Reasons for Shopping at Corner Grocery Stores**

Reasons for shopping at corner grocery store	Hispanic Consumers	Anglo Consumers
Close to home	45.2%	15.7%
Convenience	1.1%	18.1%
Emergency shopping	22.6%	28.9%
Freshness	9.7%	1.2%
Other reasons	14.6%	10.8%

patronage, while Anglo consumers reflect a variety of reasons, such as closeness, convenience, and emergency shopping. The supermarkets, however, are clearly viewed as cheaper than corner stores, and are chosen predominantly to save money. Other reasons, such as selection, were also given.

It is important to recognize that both Anglo and Puerto Rican samples appear to view the corner store and the supermarket as similar but complementary institutions. While price advantages are found at supermarkets, the corner stores clearly provide the convenience of nearby location.

**Supermarket Versus Corner Store: Perceptions.** The Hispanic consumers were asked to compare the bodega and the supermarket regarding the variety of Hispanic products and brands, as well as the prices of the Hispanic products and brands. Interestingly, over 50 percent reported that bodegas carried *less* variety than the supermarket, with about 45 percent estimating the variety as greater or about the same as the supermarket. In terms of price perceptions, Hispanic consumers largely felt that the bode-

TABLE 1C

**Consumer Reasons for Shopping at Supermarkets**

Reasons for shopping at supermarket	Hispanic Consumers	Anglo Consumers
Cheaper/Save money	67.7%	55.4%
Freshness	4.8%	0.0%
Selection	22.6%	25.3%
Other Reasons	2.7%	16.8%

\* The percentages reported in these tables reflect multiple responses.

ga's prices are higher than those at supermarkets (79 percent), which is in direct contrast to bodegueros' perceptions. Only 32 percent of the bodegueros reported that their prices were higher than those in supermarkets.

Transactions were largely in cash, although credit purchases were often observed. As items were bought on credit, the amount due was noted on the customer's account. Bodegueros frequently broke bulk in somewhat nontraditional ways, such as selling one cigarette for a quarter from a newly-opened package.

### **Bodega Services**

Similar to the findings of Kizilbash and Garman, an environment for service and solving problems was evident in considering the types of services provided by the Hispanic retailers. A breakdown of these services by store type is given in Table 2.

FIGURE 2

#### **A Transaction in Process Shows the Bodeguero Counting Out Change for the Customer**

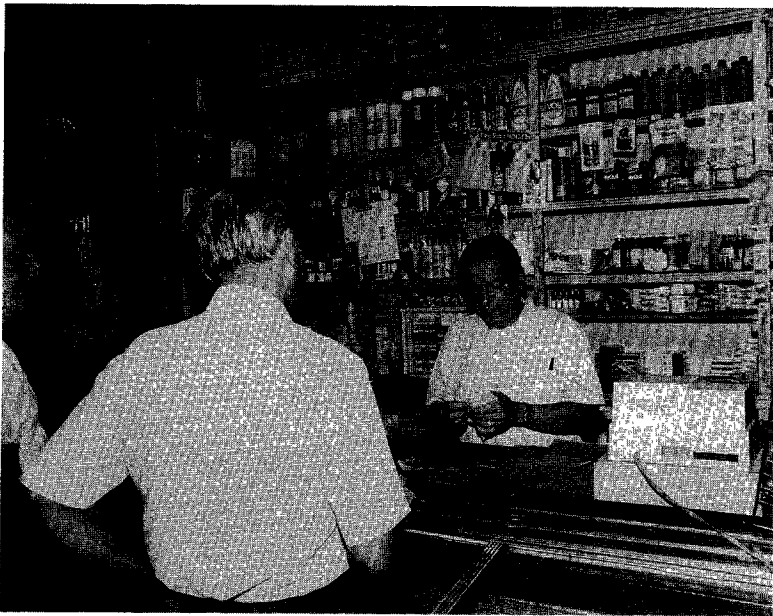


TABLE 2

**Services Offered by Neighborhood Grocery Stores**

Specific Service Offered	Hispanic Retailer (% Offers)	Anglo Retailer (% Offers)	Hispanic Consumers (% Using)	Anglo Consumers (% Using)
Accept coupons	4.0%	30.3%	34.0%	85.5%
Accept food stamps	84.0%	75.8%	59.7%	18.1%
Free delivery	40.0%	45.5%	5.9%	8.4%
Credit	62.0%	57.6%	15.1%	8.4%
Cash checks	10.0%	21.2%	2.7%	12.0%
Income tax forms/ other forms	2.0%	30.3%	0.0%	1.2%
Solving problems	68.0%	75.8%	—	—
Other services	2.0%	0.0%	—	—
10 cents short— pay later	98.0%	97.0%	—	—

The bodegas were less likely to accept cents-off coupons, to cash checks, and to help with income tax or other forms than their Anglo counterparts. The problems underlying store rejection of couponing in both neighborhoods are discussed at length by Kaufman and Hernandez (1990). On the other hand, food stamp acceptance, free delivery, credit ability, and consideration to their customers when they are a few cents short were services available in the two groups of stores with similar frequencies.

It appears that the corner store as an institution is likely to provide a hub of community activity and services. Because of its small size, personalized treatment and customized services seem to be the corner store's trademarks, whether located in a Hispanic or Anglo neighborhood. However, what makes a bodega truly different from an Anglo corner store is its ethnic dimension. The bodega is a place for the maintenance of Latin culture.

**Bodegas and Latin Culture**

The bodega's clientele is largely Hispanic. Eighty-six percent of the bodegas reported catering to Hispanics, who represented at least 41 percent of all customers. The bodega provides an environment of Latin culture in the foods, smells, and sounds which are evident. While quick purchases can be made close to home, the bodega does not resemble the stereotypical mass market convenience stores which proliferate in suburban United States. Instead, we found ample evidence of Hispanic products as integral

parts of the bodega assortment (see Table 3). For instance, fresh fruits and vegetables, such as plantains (similar to bananas, but larger and sweeter) and viandas (tubers), were carried by about half of the bodegas. Brands from the homeland were prominently displayed. Hispanic products are essential to daily life, as approximately 63 percent of the Hispanic consumers reported preparing ethnic dinners seven days a week.

Figure 3 shows an interior dump-bin technique frequently employed by bodegas in presenting produce in a centrally-located display. A combina-

TABLE 3

**The Bodega's Role in the Maintenance of Latin Culture**

Hispanic Customers' Cultural Traits	
Language used in questionnaire	72.6% Spanish 22.6% English
Ability to speak English	24.2% not at all 37.1% not well 24.2% well 14.5% very well
Family speaks Spanish at home	2.7% never 24.7% sometimes 30.6% most of the time 38.2% all the time
Times ethnic dinner prepared	62.9% seven times a week
Strength of ethnic identity	72.6% very strong 19.9% strong 7.5% more or less 0.0% weak 0.0% very weak
Bodegas' Cultural Offerings	
Language used with customers	6.0% Spanish 6.0% English 86.0% both Spanish and English
Frequency Spanish spoken in business	80.0% half of the time or more
Translation	42.0%
Carry Hispanic brands	94.0%
Carry plantains	48.0%
Carry viandas	46.0%

FIGURE 3

**The Interior of Some Bodegas Offer a Large Array of Fresh Fruits and Vegetables**



tion of national, local, and homeland brands are arranged on the perimeter of the display.

Factors associated with ethnicity and language were clearly dominant in the Hispanic corner stores. Ninety-four percent of the bodegas in the sample sell Hispanic brands compared to only 9 percent of the Anglo stores. The majority of bodegueros spoke either Spanish or English with their customers, with 80 percent reporting that Spanish is spoken in conducting business at least half the time. Turning to the responses of the Hispanic consumer sample on the issue of ethnicity, 53.8 percent of the Hispanic respondents preferred to speak Spanish. Almost half of the bodegueros reported providing some translation services (42 percent), while few Anglo stores did the same. Interestingly, only 1.6 percent of the Hispanic consumers reported obtaining help with translation at their bodega.

Manufacturers who fail to understand the importance of the cultural maintenance function may greatly limit their capabilities to successfully enter the bodega distribution system within Hispanic neighborhoods. The

bodeguero, or owner, is viewed as a person of importance in transmitting advice and is frequently the person who recommends new products throughout the barrio (Sains 1989). Since shelf space is critically limited, gaining the bodeguero's endorsement is often the key to such market entrance. Manufacturers who enlist bilingual sales forces, hire bilingual brokers, tailor their p-o-p displays to the limited bodega display space, utilize sampling, and distribute appropriate promotional items are likely to reach bodega owners and consequently, their customers (Sains 1989). Firms such as Frito-Lay, Quaker, and La Cena have utilized these techniques, adjusted to the tastes of the specific Hispanic market.

### DISCUSSION

The present study attempted to address a gap in the retailing literature by examining the small grocery store in a Puerto Rican neighborhood. In particular, we have focused on the location and physical description of bodegas, store patronage, reasons to buy, comparisons with supermarkets, and services offered. These issues were investigated from both the retailer and consumer perspectives, across Hispanic and Anglo samples. Several findings emerged, which identify the bodega as a center for cultural maintenance, as well as a store for convenient, quick purchases.

Both theoretical and methodological implications can be developed from the findings. While the bodega is a small, and relatively inefficient retail institution, it has endured throughout Hispanic neighborhoods despite the influx of larger, more modern, and lower-priced supermarkets. Thus, reasons for the bodega's longevity cannot be adequately explained from solely an economic perspective. Instead, the bodega's cultural functions must be studied as well. Dynamic interaction with the neighborhood characterizes the bodega, and it forms an integral part of barrio life. Our research indicates that the barrio Hispanic desires certain ethnic foods as well as certain attributes which recognize the cultural background of the community.

The responses of consumers indicate that the bodega appears to complement, rather than compete with, the supermarkets in the barrio. While supermarkets provide bulk purchases made infrequently, the corner stores offer the convenience/ethnic goods combination which match the shopping patterns of the barrio residents. Corner locations within the dwelling areas appear to be optimal sites for the continuous flow of neighbors who patronize the bodegas on a regular basis.

When the bodega was researched together with a sample of Anglo retailers, an interesting picture emerged: many of the services which have

traditionally been associated with Hispanic grocery stores appear to prevail in the Anglo stores as well. Such commonality among several services suggests that their presence is likely to derive from the function of the small neighborhood store, rather than from specific ethnic group tastes. A specific limitation of the study is that it primarily researched Puerto Ricans, without studying other Hispanic subgroups.

The personal contact between retailer and consumer appears to be a plus which exists in both communities. Almost the entire Hispanic and Anglo retail samples reported allowing their customers to pay later if ten cents "short" when making a purchase. The ongoing, almost familial relationship with the bodeguero is vastly unlike the impersonal rapid transactions which characterize mass market convenience stores.

From a research perspective, difficulties were encountered in interpreting the retailer reports of store services. Retailers were asked whether or not a specific service was offered in their store, which provided no information regarding the frequency with which those services are actually used. Nor can the researcher determine how important each type of service is within the community without requesting more in-depth information as part of the interview. It would be interesting to determine the relative importance of each service within the Hispanic community, and to investigate if that pattern prevailed over all bodegas, or if certain services were predominant among specific bodegas.

Over 72 percent of the Hispanic consumers sampled reported "very strongly" identifying with their ethnic identity. The bodega's function in preserving such Latin culture appears to contribute to its endurance in Hispanic neighborhoods like those surveyed in the Philadelphia sample.

Finally, the importance of Spanish language in business cannot be over-emphasized, given that over half of the Hispanic consumers interviewed reported that they were not able to speak English well, or not at all. Almost 70 percent spoke Spanish at home most or all of the time, with over half preferring to speak Spanish rather than English, although situational uses of homeland versus dominant languages are found to occur (O'Guinn and Faber 1986). Such preference for the Spanish language would be expected to carry over into the neighborhood shopping environment.

## CONCLUSIONS

The barrio is a virtually untapped market for U.S. manufacturers; little formal knowledge of the barrio shopping process appears to be prevalent in the retail literature. On the East Coast alone, 8,500 bodegas support the Hispanic communities in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. The 2.5

million Hispanics in the New York metropolitan area represent a sizeable bodega market, with approximately \$20 billion to spend each year, part of which is spent in daily shopping trips to nearby bodegas (Sains 1989). Through the in-depth consideration of the bodega, the present manuscript has attempted to provide some needed insight into this seemingly out-dated institution which continues to thrive and serve important functions within the barrio.

Manufacturers, in particular, who wish to establish their goods in barrio markets like that surveyed in the present paper, should pay careful attention to the bodega shopping "habit" which characterizes many barrio residents. Rather than just mimicking services which may prevail in corner grocery stores in any neighborhood, manufacturers are encouraged to view the bodega as a culturally-based convenience store, serving the dual functions of ethnic maintenance as well as quick, close-to-home purchasing.

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