

The Importance of Latinx Grocery Stores

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The Latinx population in the US has increased significantly, and with these demographic changes comes a growth in buying power. Based on a study done in 2011, the country's buying power was expected to increase 27.5% while that of only the Hispanic population was estimated at a 48.1% increase between 2011 and 2016 (Bueno 2011). Among the 7 market sectors IBISWorld identified that would benefit the most from this growth is food. To accommodate the needs of this increase, Latinx grocery stores have grown in popularity and importance. Both large chains like Compare Foods and smaller family-owned stores have popped up across the country following demographic shifts. Aside from these stores merely fulfilling an economic need like traditional grocery stores, they also serve as places of community that celebrate cultural diversity. As these stores continue to spread and gain popularity, it is important to delve deeper into their origins and effects.

One place that has had a significant demographic shift is Charlotte, North Carolina, which has evolved into a new south city, moving away from the racial binary to welcome many immigrants. Rather than have specific cultural quarters like many other big cities, many of Charlotte's immigrants live in what have been referred to as "salad-bowl suburbs" (Hanchett 2010) which contribute to Charlotte's shift in being ranked as the "fifth most segregated city" in 1970 to the country's second least segregated urban city in 2000 (Hanchett 2010). A prime example of this integration and demographic shift is the evolution of the East Side and South Boulevard neighborhoods. After World War 2,

families that worked in the mills moved out of these neighborhoods and into the suburbs, making way for “upwardly mobile African Americans” (Hanchett 2010) in the 1970s. In the early 1990s, Latinx construction crews arrived as the city grew, contributing to the Brookings Institute study naming Charlotte the “fourth fastest Latino growing city in the United States during the 1990s” and the “second-fastest from 2000-2005” (Hanchett 2010).

According to the Charlotte Observer, census data shows that the Latinx population in Mecklenburg and the surrounding counties has grown 33% from 2010 to 2018 and the Latinx population makes up 14% of Mecklenburg county’s population (“Looking Ahead to the 2020 Census as the Charlotte-Area Hispanic Population Rises”). As the Latinx population rises, so does their buying power. This growth in turn leads to an increase in businesses catering to the needs of the Latinx population. In the East Side and South Boulevard neighborhoods in Charlotte, stores catering to different ethnic groups are situated side-by-side in small shopping strips. A staple of these shops are Latinx grocery stores.

Latinx grocery stores are a center for people to meet, come together, and see their culture mirrored in the products offered. In Boston, a Hi-Lo Foods that had been in place for 47 years was replaced by a Whole Foods in 2011, and many members of the community had strong opinions surrounding this change. For some, the store had a cultural importance, while others welcomed the change as Jamaica Plains became more gentrified. The Hi-Lo Foods was referred to as “an important institution for Boston’s Latino community” (*Mixed Reactions To Whole Foods Store Opening In*

Jamaica Plain); as one customer explained, the store made her feel more comfortable, especially because many people there speak Spanish (Stockton 2011). The Hi-Lo was more than a store for some, it was a “social center for the local Latino community, where customers run into friends and family and can immerse in their language and culture” (Stockton 2011). The store’s contents and exterior changed as the demographics of the neighborhood became more Latinx. Stockton explains, “reflecting its Latin flavor on the exterior, [... a] Caribbean-inspired mural in colors [...] echo[es] the fruits and spices inside” (Stockton 2011). Some in the community claimed that the Hi-Lo was dirty, sold food of “poor quality,” and that the community deserved the change to Whole Foods. (*Mixed Reactions To Whole Foods Store Opening In Jamaica Plain*). Regardless of this specific Hi-Lo, it is evident that Latinx grocery stores play a vital role in communities.

Aside from the cultural significance of these grocery stores, they also fill in the gaps in areas with high Retail Environment Food Indexes (REFIs), or areas that have a high ratio of unhealthy food sources to healthy ones (Epstein 2012). REFIs mostly occur in areas inhabited by people with “lower levels of education, lower incomes, and higher unemployment” (Dutko et al.). According to a 2016 census publication regarding information about income and poverty, the average hispanic household income is \$11,364 less than the average income for all races (Jessica L Semega et al.). This gap results in higher levels of Latinxs living in areas with high REFIs. Although many REFIs are found in more rural areas, the urban areas that have high REFIs tend to be areas with higher concentrations of minority populations (Dutko et al.). Grocery stores like

Hi-Lo Foods and Compare Foods offer produce at lower prices and help bridge the gap contributing to the high ratios. When areas like Jamaica Plains become gentrified and stores like Whole Foods take the place of cheaper options, those who rely on lower prices are often forced out of these areas or seek other options to fulfill their produce needs. When a Jamaica Plains resident was notified that the Hi-Lo was closing, she explained that the alternative grocery store nearby was for “people who can throw their money away” (*Mixed Reactions To Whole Foods Store Opening In Jamaica Plain*).

Latinx grocery stores tend to offer cheaper prices for staple products that cannot be found in traditional stores.

As the Latinx population grows in the US, it is important to study the changes that are being made to cater to the demographic shifts. The country tends to follow economic trends, and since there is a steady increase in buying power of Latinx customers, more markets are trying to cater to their needs. Whether it is creating or expanding an international aisle in a traditional grocery store, or more Latinx grocery stores opening, it is evident that the areas experiencing changes evolve. Charlotte experienced an integrated mix of stores to cater to the immigrants moving into the East Side and South Boulevard; Hanchett refers to this integration of immigrants as the “Charlotte Way.” The Hi-Lo in Boston changed their products to cater to the demographic shifts, which they exemplified with their Caribbean mural. Latinx grocery stores tend to an area’s social needs like serving as a place for community to gather and share their cultures. These grocery stores are also vital to the health of minority neighborhoods to decrease their REFI by providing fresh produce at lower costs. There is not a lot of research about the

roles Latinx and ethnic grocery stores play in communities, however as these establishments spread, their importance and their effects will become more evident. Further research on this topic may go as far as affecting the opening and closing rates of Latinx grocery stores in communities at higher risk of increased REFI.

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